YOOKA-LAYLEE HOW THE SPIRIT OF RARE WAS REBORN



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PlayStation®VR

WE'VE PLAYED EVERYTHING

EVE: VALKYRIE
REZ INFINITE
RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER
BATTLEZONE
DRIVECLUB VR
THUMPER

BATMAN: ARKHAM VR
RIGS: MECHANIZED COMBAT LEAGUE
UNTIL DAWN: RUSH OF BLOOD
PLAYSTATION VR WORLDS

+
- ESSENTIAL SETUP TIPS AND TRICKS
- THE AMAZING VR GAMES STILL TO COME
- IS PLAYSTION VR WORTH THE MONEY?

CAN FFXV LIVE UP TO THE HYPE?
Tabata talks troubled development

RESIDENT EVIL VII HANDS-ON
Terrifying new details emerge



POKÉMON SUN & MOON EVOLVES
The final verdict on Game Freak's latest

HISTORY OF SPACE INVADERS
The retro classic dissected

I don't know about you, but I've been playing a lot of PlayStation VR recently. I was already taken with the technology, but Sony's take on the medium has been a wonder to behold. It has its limitations, but it's incredibly impressive all the same.

But as good as the headset design is and as varied as the launch lineup has been (which we get into later this issue), the real hero of PlayStation VR is a six-year old piece of technology given new life and new purpose with virtual reality; PlayStation Move.

I really can't get over how well these comparatively ancient motion controllers work in combination with such modern technology. I had already found out how much more potent virtual reality can be when combined with motion tracking and individual arm movement thanks to the Vive, and I'm incredibly impressed with how close PSVR gets to matching it.

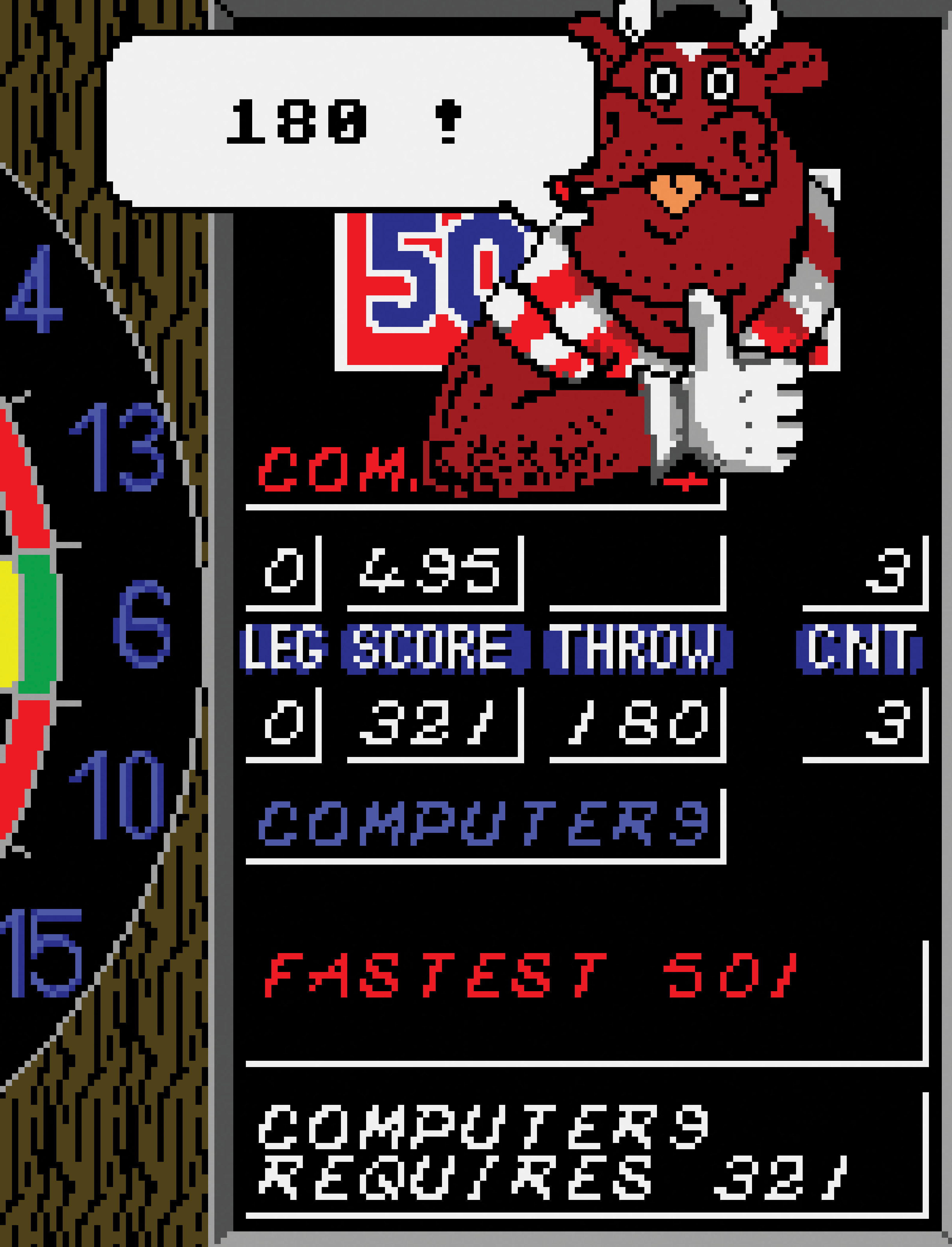
Up until now, I don't believe Move has been given enough credit for its part in making PSVR work as well as it does and I have to commend Sony for realising it had the tech it needed already rather than trying to repackage and revamp Move as an excuse to squeeze more money from us all. It could so easily have been done. As it is, those of us who were captured by the motion gaming craze of six year ago can now enjoy VR in a wholly more immersive way.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



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Discuss

NEWS
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PS4 NO?

Where are the PS4 Pro Games?

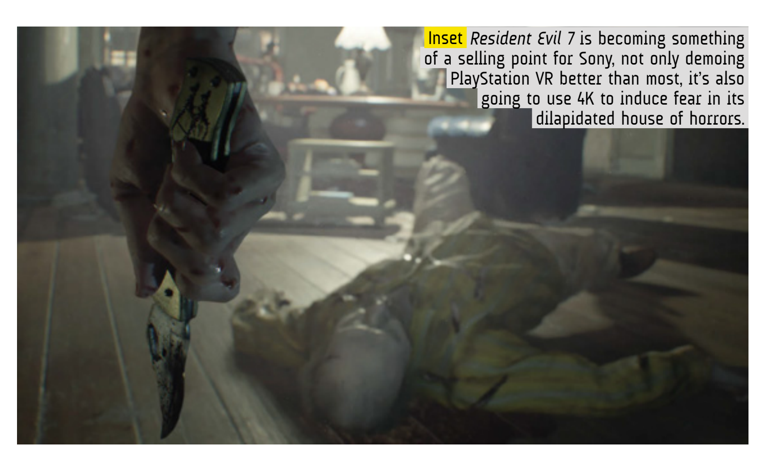
→ With Sony about to take a leap into 4K gaming, games™ looks into the startling lack of launch support for the new system

The PlayStation 4 Pro is Sony's answer to 4K gaming. A brand-new, powerful, system that's set to support 4K, HDR and provide enhancements to PSVR, but many developers are still yet to confirm support. Just how difficult is it to get a game ready for 4K on console?

Developers are scrambling. On 10 November, Sony is pushing the videogame industry into a new era. The company is launching the most powerful home console ever seen on the market; peddling fresh hardware that's will not only provide a boost in performance to PlayStation VR, but will also offer enhanced fidelity across the library of games currently available on the PS4 system. Given this momentous occasion for Sony, however, you might just find yourself questioning where all the games to support and show off this new technology are exactly. The PS4 Pro isn't exactly flush with 4K games this holiday season.

The PlayStation 4 Pro is launching at an attractive £349/$399, the price the original PS4 hit the market at, though there's likely two factors holding you back from trading in your old system: the lack of a 4K television in your home and a surprising lack of games to play on the new system. Of the former, if you are yet to upgrade to a 4K TV set (of which there is solid evidence to suggest that it's wise to hold fire on buying one as manufacturers struggle to find solid ground between price, fidelity, motion blur, input lag and full HDR support), though the latter is certainly more concerning.

This comes down, largely, to the secrecy involved in the launch of PS4 Pro. We've known bits of information about the console since GDC in March, after developers talking about the system were overheard



Inset *Resident Evil 7* is becoming something of a selling point for Sony, not only demoing PlayStation VR better than most, it's also going to use 4K to induce fear in its dilapidated house of horrors.



DATA STREAM → ROCKSTAR HAS CONFIRMED RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 FOR RELEASE Q3 2017




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Inset While first-party support may be lacking at launch, Sony is making 4K and HDR gaming a huge selling point of its 2017 titles, with *Days Gone* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* already impressing at this early stage of development.

> "I was amazed how good the game looked when we first got it working"
> David Hensley, Killing Floor 2

by journalists back when it was codenamed Neo. The thing is, this is also where many developers were finding out about the console for the first time – leaving many scrambling to get 4K-ready versions (be they upscaled or native) of their titles ready for launch.

"GDC is when we found out about it," says Tripwire's David Hensley, game director on the upcoming *Killing Floor 2*, though he's quick to be impressed by the results. "I was amazed how good the game looked when we first got it working. We had tried a couple of rendering techniques… but what we have [working] now clicked right at the end [of development] and I was totally blown away, and it looks much better than the PC version does most of the time. It runs really well."

"All the credit for that goes to our graphics engineers," admits fellow Tripwire game director William T. Munk. "They are the ones who really made that happen. I remember when I first saw it to and I was like, 'Dude, you've got to be kidding me this looks f*king amazing!'"

And it does. We've played *Killing Floor 2*, the upcoming co-op FPS that lets you (quite literally) procedurally paint the floor, walls and any other surface you may come across, red with the blood of the hundreds of zombies rushing your position, in both HDR and 4K and the difference is startling. The level of graphical detail is impressive, the sharp textures and atmospheric lighting are details that still resonate even weeks later.

Gaming in 4K doesn't provide the same leap that we saw between SD and HD gaming, but it's difficult to imagine anybody being truly disappointed once they see it in action for themselves. But therein lies the problem for Sony, it's nearly impossible to show off the benefits of the PS4 Pro unless the consumer in question already owns a 4K TV – a luxury item that, researchers estimate, fewer than one in 20 households currently own. That makes putting the work in something of a risk for developers.

"Our engineers, they were crunching. I remember when they got the eureka moment when they finally got it, because before they were sweating their asses off," Munk laughs. "For us, it wasn't like, 'Oh, we have to have it,' but we knew it was special. We really wanted


PROJECT SCORPIO WILL BE NATIVE 4K FOR FIRST-PARTY GAMES ACCORDING TO MICROSOFT




Above *The Elder Scrolls Online* may have been out for a few years, but developer Zenimax Online has been able to use its expanding technology – which allows the game to run on a variety of hardware systems – to easily port the 4K version to PS4 Pro.

to do it… but we didn't even know when the PS4 Pro was going to release!"

"It was a bit of a gamble for us, to invest a bunch of time and work into it," adds Hensley, who notes that it took around three months for the engineers at Tripwire to crack the updated version, working off of limited information from Sony due to the secrecy surrounding the project – they, like many developers, didn't even know the final name for the console until the PlayStation Meeting event that took place in early September.

There's a common misconception that, because games are largely developed on PC and ported to console, that getting a 4K version up and running is as easy as patching in the high-end PC fidelity. This, largely, isn't the case. But it has made for some surprise arrivals on launch, one of which being *The Elder Scrolls Online* – one of the only titles to run in native 4K on the device in 2016. That's all down to the way in which ZeniMax Online designed the title from the outset.

"*ESO* started life long ago as a PC-only game, and one of our mandates for the game back then was that it be extremely forgiving about the type of hardware it was running on," says *ESO* game director Matt Firor, noting how the studio's commitment to getting the MMORPG to run all types of hardware has given the studio the capacity to be fluid with patching in high-end PlayStation support.

"We wanted it to run – and run well – on laptops as well as high-end gaming rigs. Because of this, we already ran at 4K on high-end PCs, and the concept of different settings based on different hardware configurations was already built into the client engine. This made it easier to integrate the PS4 Pro SDK than it otherwise would have been, as well as to make additions to the SDK to make native 4K possible."

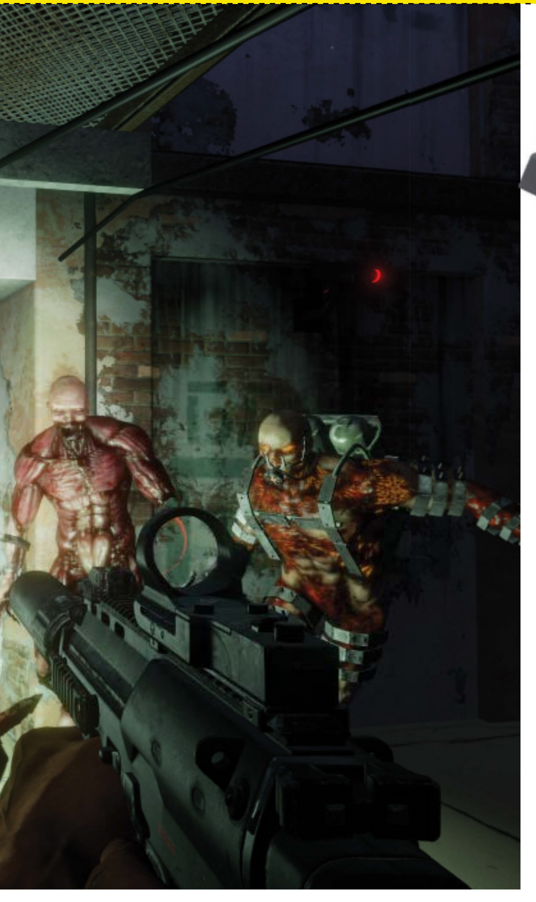
It's the difficulty many developers will find integrating the SDK that's holding us back from a PS4 Pro launch with hundreds of 4K-ready titles. Large studios such as Monolith, Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal and Naughty Dog have had dedicated teams working on patches to get their games ready for the improved fidelity – *Shadow Of Mordor, Rise Of The Tomb Raider, Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* and *The Last Of Us: Remastered* will all be amongst the supported 4K-ready launch titles – though this isn't a luxury many developers can afford. For most, it requires dragging developers out of the main team – a dangerous proposition around the launch of any new title – leaving them to crunch away at getting the conflicting graphics programs to play nice.

"There's a lot of custom graphics programming," says Hensley after we questioned why Tripwire couldn't just port the 4K PC version of *Killing Floor 2* to PS4 Pro. "A big thing about our PC and our PS4 version, our PC used a Direct X render and the PS4 uses an OpenGL render that is custom to PlayStation. To get it to work on PlayStation 4 Pro we had to completely rewrite the renderer from the ground up. That was a huge challenge; to get the PlayStation 4 Pro to work there was [a lot of] work like that but it wasn't as crazy as just getting the damn renderer to work in the first place."

Like every other game we've seen running in 4K or had the opportunity to play for ourselves, the PlayStation 4 Pro does bring a real benefit to the final product. Developers can choose how they use the power, but whether it's in producing more detailed crowds, improving the frame-rate and performance, creating stunning lighting and particle effects or in just boosting the graphical fidelity, we've always come away impressed.

The problem Sony will have now, perhaps even more than it has done with PSVR, is in

DATA STREAM → CUPHEAD HAS BEEN DELAYED TO MID-2017 AS THE TEAM CONTINUES TO POLISH





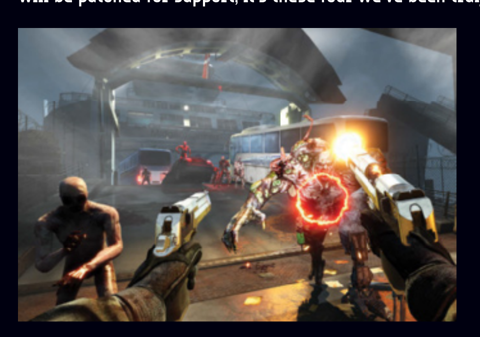
how it can demo the improvements. When the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 arrived on the scene, there were clear gameplay improvements to see, with the increased power of the consoles being used to foster new gameplay experiences as well as graphical leaps. That isn't the case here, with the PS4 Pro simply being used to bolster resolution and frame-rate – that's difficult to fully grasp if you're watching game reveals through a Twitch stream or 1080p YouTube video. In fact, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*'s Aaryn Flynn inadvertently put it the best as he showed off BioWare's new game for the first time: "before we get started," he said at the PlayStation Meeting, "if you're not watching this on a 4K screen, find one and come back."

Sadly, for seemingly most of the market, that's easier said than done. 4K is unproven in the living room and manufacturers, such as Sony and Samsung, still have a long way to go before they prove that the technology to power these TVs can actually work to the benefit of videogames as opposed to standard media. Once you see the PS4 Pro in action it may just convince you that it's time to upgrade, but until more gamers start getting that opportunity expect games and content to look a little light on the ground for PS4 Pro.

The PS4 Pro launch titles

→ The 4K releases you can expect straight away on Sony's new console

So you've got your 4K TV and you've picked up a PlayStation 4 Pro, but what games will really show off all of your new technology? While a handful of 2016's biggest releases, such as *Watch Dogs 2* and *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, will be patched for support, it's these four we've been truly impressed with so far.



KILLING FLOOR 2

Do you remember how much fun *Left 4 Dead* was? *Killing Floor 2* is like that, but it's bloodier and faster. Running in 4K, the game takes on a whole new dimension as Tripwire is able to make its enemies and environments look extra nasty – a welcomed distraction from the hundreds of zombies doing their best to tear you and your buddies limb from limb.



SHADOW OF MORDOR

Monolith's *Shadow Of Mordor* was a looker when it launched in 2014, but thanks to the PS4 Pro the team has been able to work wonders on improving immersion. The game won't make use of HDR to increase colour depth, but will instead use the added processing power to provide more detailed character models, increase the size of its crowds and provide sharper resolutions when up close and personal with enemies.



RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

This was one of the most attractive games of 2015 when it launched on Xbox One, though Crystal Dynamics has somehow found a way to make those vistas even more gorgeous. It's all thanks to the PS4 Pro, which will give *ROTTR* players the ability to switch between three graphical modes: one offering a higher frame rate, one more detailed visuals and a final option that gives enhanced lighting, shadow and reflections at the standard 1080p and 30fps.



INFAMOUS: FIRST LIGHT

Due to the added pressure of getting the game to run on more powerful hardware, Sony is allowing developers the opportunity to best choose how to make use of the tech. Sucker Punch's *Infamous: First Light*, for instance, is using it to boost the HDR colour, shaking off the limitations of the RGB colour spectrum to bring incredible neon particle visuals and sparkling hyper-realistic lighting effects into the fray.



DUE TO PROCESSOR LIMITATIONS, PSVR NEEDS TO BE UNPLUGGED TO ENJOY HDR ON PS4





A TIME FOR HEROES

The revival of the World War II shooter

Why one indie game developer is looking to revive a forgotten sub-genre

Of all the studios we would have guessed would try to take on the classic World War II multiplayer shooter arena and fill the gap left by *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield*, the maker of *Pneuma: Breath Of Life* wasn't high on the list. And yet that's exactly what Bulkhead Interactive is doing.

Battalion 1944 was backed on Kickstarter to the tune of £317,000 earlier in the year and has been in closed alpha, gradually building and improving even while the team was also getting *The Turing Test* out of the door. And it's all because of the passion this team has for the genre.

"Yeah, this is a business decision for us, but really when we sat down day one of making *Pneuma* and asked 'what's your dream game?'," Bulkhead producer Joe Brammer reveals to us, "Mine was a World War II shooter because no one is making World War II games anymore really. I'm 21 and I boot up a shooter and I don't know what's going on. There's too many different unlocks and 14-year-old kids yelling in my ear. I want to change that so that I have a different game to play. I want to be in charge of that game. I'm the right guy to do it and we're the right team to do it."

The build up for Bulkhead has been gradual with its finances bolstered by two puzzle game releases so far. *Pneuma* got it off the ground and made sure people could be paid full-time, *The Turing Test* has proven it can handle longer-form experiences and narrative if it wants to. And now with what is likely to be its most high-profile release, the team has gone to great lengths to show how it is handling its Kickstarter cash. "With *Battalion* we actually released our tax information and our finance information publicly so that we could say this is where the tax goes." Brammer says. "This is actually how much we get of £317,000: I think we get £278,000, after tax, after cuts from Kickstarter and after payment fees. It's really interesting to actually research how much it is and publicise it."



Above Bulkhead is currently in production on *Battalion 1944* off the back of a successful release of *The Turing Test*. It will be good to see this team try its hands at something a little different this time.

With a team of young and hungry game-makers already serving as Bulkhead's core team, supported by industry veterans and even some eSports experts, *Battalion 1944* is poised to be the balanced indie answer to the sugar rush of the modern FPS game. "I just want there to be a better World War II shooter out there and not necessarily take *Call Of Duty*'s position, – those guys inspired us massively over the years – but I'd like to see more shooters out there. At the moment people seem to play two and they're so different. Why are *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield* competing when they're totally different games?"

A fair question, but hopefully in the near future we'll be seeing a new competitor enter the fray.

True inspirations

The games Battalion 1944 is riffing on

CALL OF DUTY 2

Hard to believe it's been 11 years since Infinity Ward released this hugely successful and influential shooter on the world. As an Xbox 360 launch title it introduced a lot of new players to the concept of online shooters and set the bar for the genre.



BATTLEFIELD 1942

Establishing itself early as a combination of high-brow tactical gaming and action, *Battlefield 1942* is still held up as one of the all-time great online shooters and feels very much like the game DICE is trying to recapture with *Battlefield 1*.



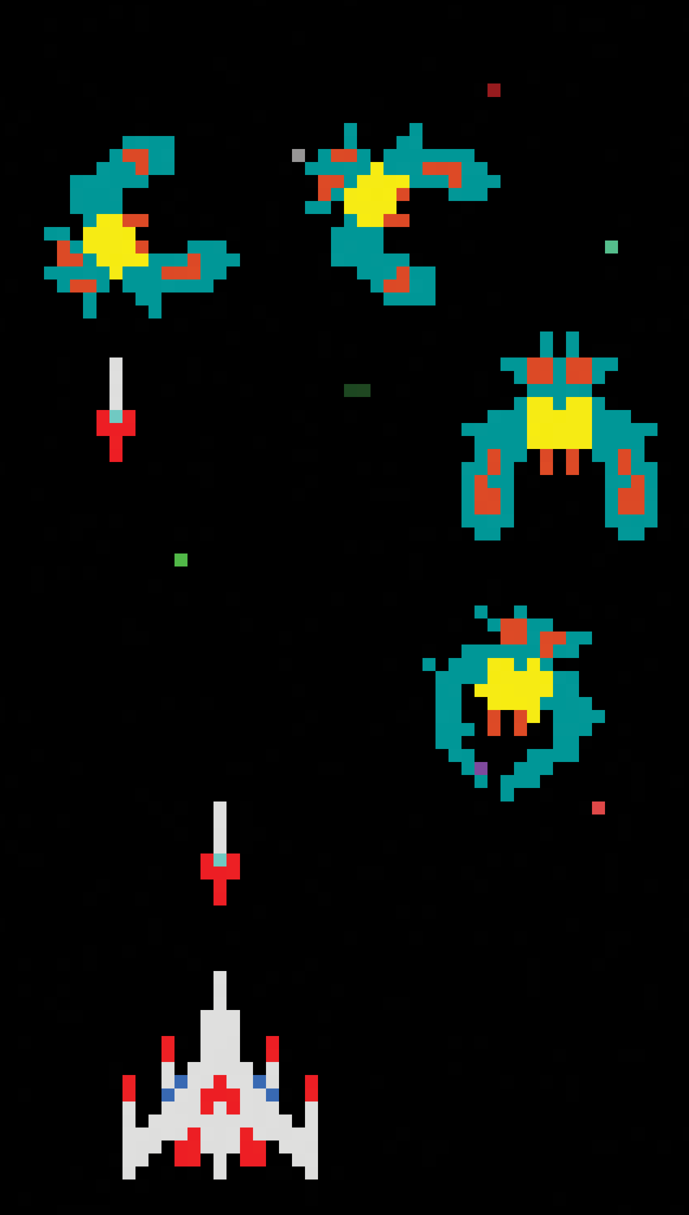
MEDAL OF HONOR

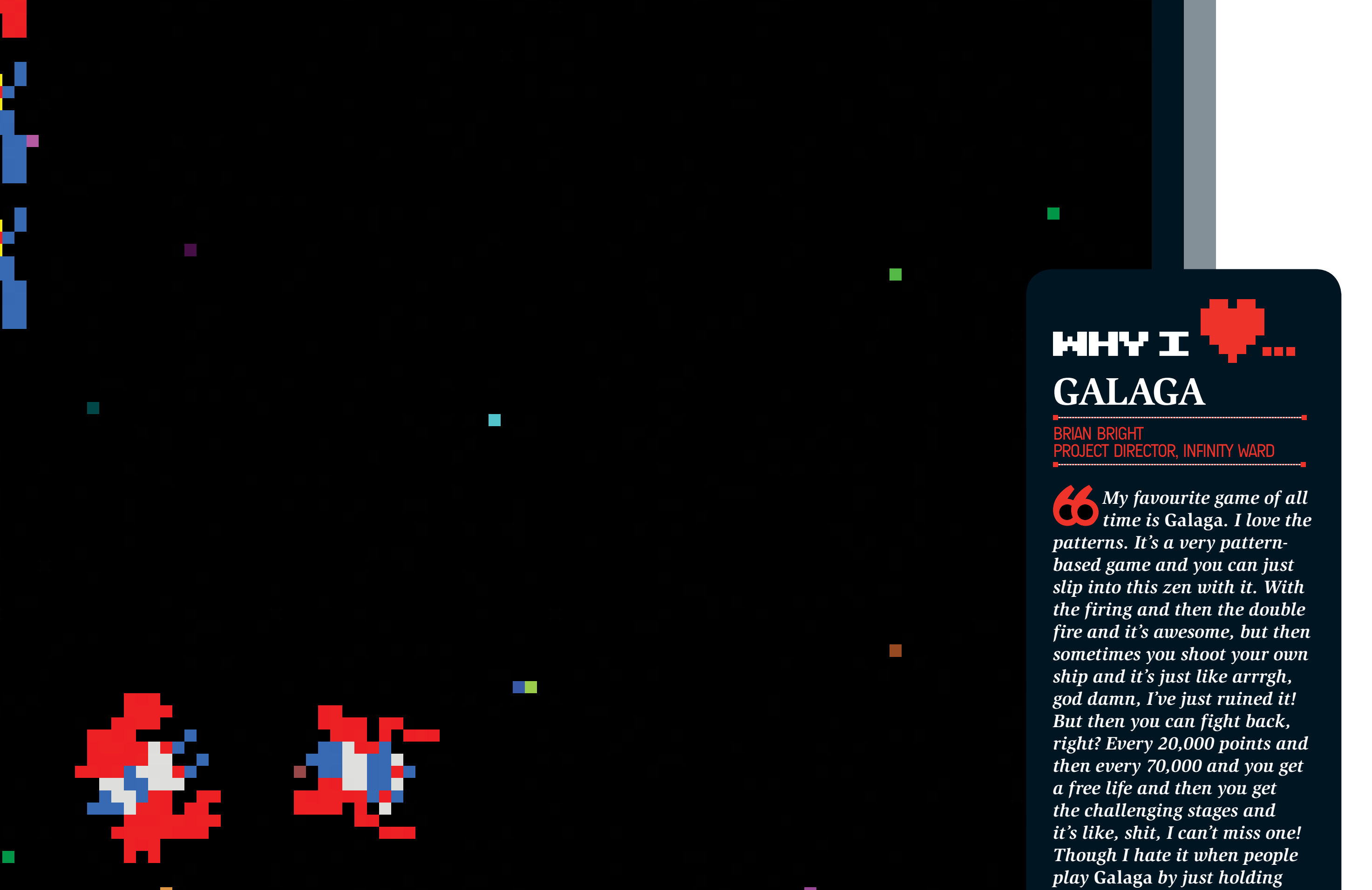
Released way back in 1999, *Medal Of Honor* was the game that really put cinematic realism in World War II shooters on the map. Without it we doubt we would have *Battlefield* and *Call Of Duty* as we understand them today. A truly important title in FPS history.



DATA STREAM → FIREWATCH HAS SOLD NEARLY 1 MILLION COPIES AND IS GETTING A MOVIE ADAPTATION


"I hate it when people play Galaga by just holding the button down, that is bullshit"
BRIAN BRIGHT, PROJECT DIRECTOR, INFINITY WARD





WHY I ❤...

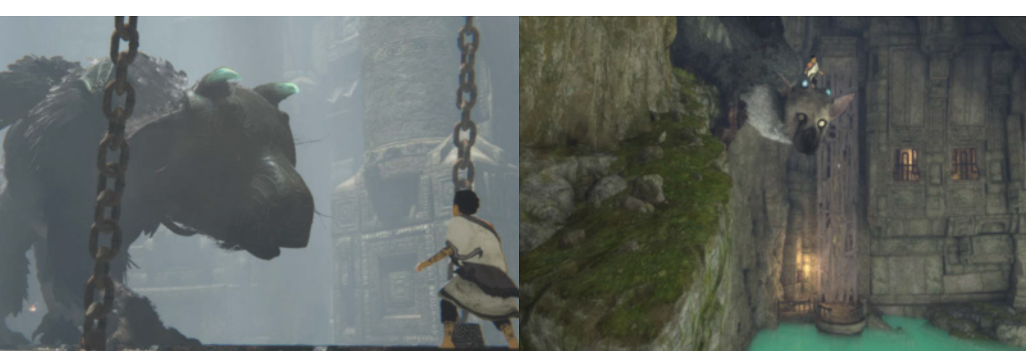
GALAGA

BRIAN BRIGHT
PROJECT DIRECTOR, INFINITY WARD

"My favourite game of all time is Galaga*. I love the patterns. It's a very pattern-based game and you can just slip into this zen with it. With the firing and then the double fire and it's awesome, but then sometimes you shoot your own ship and it's just like arrrgh, god damn, I've just ruined it! But then you can fight back, right? Every 20,000 points and then every 70,000 and you get a free life and then you get the challenging stages and it's like, shit, I can't miss one! Though I hate it when people play* Galaga *by just holding the button down, that is total bullshit; you need to keep hitting it.*

We get these rotating games every six weeks at Infinity Ward and Galaga *was one of them. It took me an hour and twenty minutes, but I got like a score of 890,000 and I swear to god I just looked like a heroin addict —every vein was popping up on my arm— and I just love it. Then they removed it and put some stupid* Bubble Bobble *shit in there instead, but [Galaga] has been my all time favourite... I can play a long time on a single quarter."*

This scene is probably quite famous with anyone who has kept an eye on the trailers. It's perhaps an important example of the game's animation priorities, as the coming leap neatly communicates Trico's weight and cattish traits.



OF BIG AND SMALL

THERE WAS A POINT towards the end of the demo where the boy had to convince Trico to jump into a large body of water. The solution revolved around finding and baiting the beast with a light-filled barrel (a common solution), but this stood out for really driving home that this is Team Ico's first game to be built around a physics engine.

When Trico finally jumped, what followed was a magnificent example of the true scale and power difference in the two characters as huge waves were built that tossed the child around like an oversized ragdoll. In a medium filled with swords, bullets and blood splatter, this was a more genuine – even moving – moment of violence.

Above: Honestly, we don't know what's going on here. Suffice to say, it seems like Trico isn't the only one of its kind. Left: Climbing on Trico, either to ride it around or access new areas, looks like it'll be a common puzzle mechanic.





The Last Guardian

CONCEPT ■ As a blend of the puzzle gameplay of *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*'s focus on magnificent beasts, this should be a unique and emotional journey.

Yes, it's real. Yes, it's coming

It all opens with the sound of children. It's hard not to notice this. Maybe these opening parts of *The Last Guardian* that will end up posted online and maybe they won't, but one thing is for sure: you're not going to get the full audio experience without a pretty fancy home audio setup and that's not something we were aware of until this new demo.

This, of course, is a classic dilemma for media experiences. Not everybody can afford a plush TV, and fewer still elaborate speakers, meaning that the full effect is easily lost. But if you are in such a position, make sure you add in a subwoofer. And if you have one already, consider connecting a second, because *The Last Guardian* sounds ancient, mystical, and *deep*.

It's gorgeous, too. We knew this already, although technically speaking it still looks more like a supercharged PlayStation 3 game than it does an upcoming PS4 title. Most notably, textures don't look as sharp as we've recently become accustomed to, and there are numerous instances of clipping where complex character animations are concerned.

The world looks ancient, mysterious, cultured, full and deep. We keep on coming back to the term 'deep', actually – there was a paucity of the airy lightness that has been present in much of the content shown up this point, and this connects both the visual and audio aspects of the aesthetic, and, we suspect, the mechanics as well.

There are some exceptions and they all seem very intentional, but by and large, the opening sequences of *The Last Guardian* appear to be dark and devoid of natural light. Spaces are mostly enclosed and the bass works overtime to give the world a fragile, hollowed-out feel. Mostly, it's ancient; brittle now, but mighty once, which makes it a terrifying place for a young boy – who's already shocked to find his body rife with fresh tattoos – to wake up.

This is communicated by the visuals, but it really is the sound that is the star of this sensory approach to storytelling. There is a surprising oomph to the boy's footsteps that says as much about these strange halls as the strange lighting and, with the volume pushed to wall-shaking volumes, it becomes apparent that Trico (that strange cat-bird creature) is not only a beast, but a huge one. Its breathing alone could make the sound design from *Jurassic Park* blush.

The first order of business in the game is to remove large arrows from the sides of the beast, and it doesn't take kindly to such assistance. In one of several displays of the true difference in scale between the two, the boy is knocked free as thanks for his efforts in removing the first bolt, and there is real violence behind how swiftly he flies and tumbles. It's the first part of the demo when nothing can really be considered light.

This extends to the beast's design, which starts to make a bit more sense after sitting through the game's extended opening. His design is failry simple, his skin almost cartoonish – light and shadow don't seem to apply to him in the same way they do the rest of the world. He comes across as an outsider, here by accident. A mistake, or maybe a curse. The only point of comparison are the ethereal blue and yellow butterflies that are flittering around the world.

> "By working together, the unlikely pair must communicate with one another to overcome tremendous obstacles and uncover the secrets of their beautiful fantasy world"
>
> PRESS RELEASE SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

More light enters once he finds a mirror shield – an artefact that causes Trico's eyes to create their own stunning light display, and proves important for leading the beast around. In fact, leading Trico on seems pleasantly intuitive, meaning that the trademark character feel of Team Ico games (if the character is a young boy, then he moves and stumbles like one; don't expect snappy controls) may be a key factor behind this game becoming an absolute favourite for many, but not quite for everyone.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony
Developer: genDESIGN / In-house
Release: 7 December 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Having attended the Osaka University of Arts, Fumito Ueda originally tried making it as an artist before turning to game design. His background shows through his work, although he has interestingly expressed interest in making an FPS once *The Last Guardian* is done.

Developer History

D, **1996 [Sat, PS1, PC]**
Enemy Zero, **1997 [Sat, PC]**
Ico, **2002 [PS2]**
Shadow of the Colossus, **2006 [PS2]**

High Point

Ico was Ueda's first game as director, and it remains a noted classic to this day. A huge step away from *D*'s campy horror, Ueda delivered something truly unique and wondrous with his debut as a lead.





■ Left: If we had to choose one image that summed up the game as a whole from what we know and have seen thus far, this would be it. The boy and Trico, together, in a moment of simple bonding.

Resident Evil VII

CONCEPT ■ A claustrophobic, first-person take on horror with a carefully restrictive visual style that is both effectively creepy and fully ready to work in VR.

A return to true horror, by way of indie influences

Don't get caught, it says. Don't get caught. If ever there were a statement that a *Resident Evil* game should make, then this is it. 'Hey', it practically screams, 'remember back when ammo was scarce and the focus was largely on surviving? We're doing that again!'

And there's not a word of a lie to be found in that statement. Certainly, nobody is going to claim that this is an action game with horror trimmings. This is a pure survival experience – one set in an environment that does everything it can to make your skin crawl.

Our demo only took a moment to bring to mind some standout indie horror titles from the past half-decade. You're being pursued, and your only option is to get away. There is no monster here, though – at least not yet; only a deranged woman who takes hospitality very seriously.

She will kill you if she gets a hold of you. We should know – we got caught three times. There was a certain shock factor involved with the first instance, although it had a lot to do with a tutorial prompt not appearing in time, and as we further explored the demo concerns grew about the consistency of the cat-and-mouse rules at play.

If we were to describe this sampling of *Resident Evil VII* in terms of mechanics alone, then it would be a stealth game. A stealth game where you're a helpless and terrified young adult rather than a super-spy, but still a stealth game. This makes it a bit troubling that we found it to be largely unclear as to if we were hidden or not.

At one point, while hiding behind a reliably sturdy box, we were found and swiftly murdered; replaying the same section, we turned the other way and watched the woman through gaping large holes in a wooden wall. Even when directly looking in our direction with lamp in hand, she never noticed us. Rather, she walked out to our previous hiding place, gave up and stormed back inside.

That said, her tantrums were a sight to behold. The entire visual styling of the game has a simple, slightly dated, found-footage aesthetic – likely to take some stress off of processing and ensure it can run in VR – and the character behaviours seems to harken back even further. Foot stamping and arm swinging (in what brings to mind terms such as hissy-fit), this deranged family (the Bakers) could well have been ripped right out of the era of fuzzy black-and-white television, and it's creepier because of it.

Our first true puzzle came in the form of a spiky, oddly-shaped piece of metal that was just left lying about outside and that needed to be rotated in front of a light until it took the shape of a spider in order to open a hidden passage.

To the game's credit, even when creeping through the narrow passage – an obvious transitional sequence – we never felt truly safe at any point, and in VR it could be overwhelmingly claustrophobic.

What followed was again a point of mixed feelings. The purity of the game's desire to be a true piece of interactive horror was evident, but so was the feeling that the game was doing its best to create the illusion of reactive AI when in reality it may very well be heavily scripted. The end of the demo was certainly intentionally linear: after finding the correct path forward, our young woman found herself crouched in a passage beneath the house, taunted and told that there was nowhere left to run.

She gets caught, and the demo closes with an interactive cinematic – eyes only: possibly the character from the *First Hour* demo, but perhaps not – in which you get to see exactly what hospitality you were running from, and why. It's suitably deranged, and the tension that exists within the Baker family has potential to slather the horror theme with a generous helping of tension.

Resident Evil VII remains a title with a lot riding on its shoulders, and may yet prove to be either a spectacular revival, or a shattering disappointment.

> "Resident Evil VII embodies the series' signature gameplay elements of exploration and tense atmosphere that first coined 'survival horror' some 20 years ago; meanwhile, a refresh of gameplay systems simultaneously propels the survival horror experience to the next level."



PRESS RELEASE, CAPCOM

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PSVR, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: 24 January 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

This may be Koushi Nakanishi's first directorial role in a numbered *Resident Evil* sequel, but he's not entirely new to the franchise. Credited as the creator of the *Resident Evil: Revelations* games, he may just be the best pick within Capcom to help steer the franchise after *Resident Evil 6* turned out to be an unfocused mess.

Developer History

Samurai Western, **2005 [PS2]**
Resident Evil 5, **2009 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]**
Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D, **2011 [3DS]**
Resident Evil: Revelations, **2012 [3DS, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U, PC]**

High Point

At a time where blockbuster horror was losing its identity and the 3DS was still in desperate need of quality software, *Resident Evil: Revelations* made a lot of people happy by being both a solid horror game and a nice showpiece for the handheld system.



■ This is where our demo came to a close, and while we only had eye control, it did a fantastic job of showing just how deranged the Bakers really are. Especially the father-son dynamic. And that food? No thanks.



■ Above: At no point did we discharge a firearm during our session, and we hope that this screen represents the rarest of rare moments.



THE BIT WHEN WE JUMPED

WHILE IT'S AGREED that some games do horror better than others, these titles still affect different people in different ways. While we felt a general sense of unease during our time playing, even getting caught didn't cause us to break out in spine-tingling terror.

Others in the room were different, though, and at one point, roughly halfway through, everyone in attendance almost sprained their spine after one player let out a truly blood-curdling scream that easily cut through our headphones. We can't guarantee that everyone is going to be terrified by *Resident Evil VII*, but it seems that those who do feel the fear are in for one hell of a ride.

Left: Although *Resident Evil VII* isn't pushing the PS4 hardware on the same level as *Horizon*, it can still pull off atmospheric details. Below: Ah, the VCR. It seems like this machine is set to play a prominent role in the game, as those who played *First Hour* are likely aware.

The environments in *Resident Evil VII* have their work cut out for them. The game is taking an approach that focuses on what might be there, rather than what is, and each room needs to communicate this.

> "With open-world single player and competitive multiplayer, you will buy and use a host of weapons and tools to approach the many challenges of this beautiful little world"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, SMAC GAMES

Tokyo 42

CONCEPT ■ Framed for a murder you didn't commit in a world where people aren't supposed to die, you must become the assassin people are accusing you of being to reveal your tormentor

Welcome to the world of aggravated assassination

It's good to see that *Tokyo 42* has a good sense of humour. We suspected that it was likely to, but trying to take a world this colourful and crazy seriously with such a withdrawn perspective would have been tough. *Tokyo 42* may be inspired by darker and more serious experiences like *Syndicate* or *Grand Theft Auto*, but at its heart it's all about fun, and getting some hands on time with it lets you know that pretty quickly.

It all begins with you being framed for murder in a future Tokyo where, it appears, everyone pretty much lives on the rooftops of the city. Everything else is covered in fog. Up in the clouds you live in what appears to be a neon dystopia, demonstrated rather nicely by the fact that the 24-hour news can tap directly into your living room and show you on TV as it describes your crimes to viewers and promises the imminent arrival of the police. And what do you do? Become an assassin in order to flush out your tormentor, of course.

This is all explained away rather neatly with the idea that death is apparently impossible in this new world where everyone takes pills that mean they come back to life after fatal encounters. As a result, murder should be impossible and killing is practically a slap on the wrist. With that in mind you are free to unleash fury and mass carnage on the population of Tokyo, safe in the knowledge that no lasting damage will be caused by your lunacy.

We leapt into this scenario on a PC with classic WASD controls for movement and a mouse for aiming whatever item we had loaded up (binoculars, gun, etc). The entire world can be spun around to change perspective, which is handy for navigating the vast open world of interconnecting buildings. Huge, daring leaps between structures are sometimes called for, and getting the world lined up right for your jump can really help to judge the distance. Thankfully, you have *Matrix*-like abilities in this regard, so such death-defying antics are encouraged.

The perspective, art and animation all combine brilliantly to evoke a living city and getting to aim down the sights of your weapon, throw explosives and generally cause mayhem and see the world respond is pretty incredible. When things really kick off, though, the game turns into a bullet-hell experience of gun-fire, swords and terrified civilians. It can get pretty intense. How this will translate to console controllers we're not entirely sure, but with the right twin-stick approach it should be just fine.



■ Arena-based multiplayer promises to be pretty chaotic with a confined play area and multiple levels of the building to work through. The single-player looks intense enough, but online it could get pretty nuts.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Mode 7
Developer: SMAC Games
Release: Q1 2017
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

SMAC Games is the creative duo of Sean Wright and Maciek Strychalski. The stunning art of the game is handled by Strychalski, while Wright is the coder and programmer that makes sure that the design of the game actually contains some interesting gameplay and holds together. This is the pair's first project as SMAC Games.



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Everspace

INFORMATION

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Rockfish Games
Developer: In-house
Release: 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

A new independent gaming studio based out of Hamburg, Germany, Rockfish Games has been set-up to create Unreal Engine 4 games that explore the vastness of space. The studio's first game is set to be *Everspace* after a successful Kickstarter campaign was funded in 2015.

CONCEPT *Everspace* is a single-player 3D space shooter with rogue-like elements, currently in early access for PC and Game Preview on Xbox One.

Space is a consistently cruel place

Could *Everspace* be the next truly great space shooter? If our first taste of Rockfish's console debut – released through Xbox One's Game Preview programme – is any indication, then the studio is certainly on the cusp of creating something truly special here. But it's still early days, and this build of the game is but a fraction of the final release. It is possible to see both the areas in which *Everspace* can succeed and the handful of issues that may hold it back from reaching its full potential. There are moments where *Everspace* bears a striking similarity to the chaotic ship-to-ship dogfights only ever glimpsed in Battlestar Galactica, though there are others where it feels like a monotonous exercise in resource management, with asteroid mining devised as some sort of horrible space punishment. Ultimately, Rockfish has the galaxy in the palm of its hands; whether it grasps it or lets it slip through its fingers will become apparent over the coming months.

> "We cannot wait to launch our very first console game on Xbox One and offer players the ability to play on both Xbox One and Windows 10 via Xbox Play Anywhere"
> **MICHAEL SCHADE,** CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF ROCKFISH GAMES

1 COMBAT IS INTENSE AND ACCESSIBLE

Everspace is an arcade-action shooter at heart. The combat is chaotic, pushing you to dodge and spin through enemy fire before unleashing your own salvo of missiles and energy cannons – switching weapon types on the fly is essential if you want to live to fight another day. Dogfights are fast and fluid, though keeping your nerve when ambushed by enemy ships can be seriously challenging. Despite the difficulty though, *Everspace* is accessible; it's a delight to dodge and weave through asteroid fields with enemies on your tail.



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2 MINING ASTEROIDS IS KIND OF A DRAG

If you stick us in the cockpit of a lightning-fast spaceship – in either first or third-person, the game supports both – arm us with a variety of weapons and tell us that we need to shoot to survive, well, we won't take too kindly to constant, monotonous mining. Resource collection and management has too great a presence in *Everspace* at this stage in development; it slows the game to a crawl and drags the attention away from the spectacle of the environments and combat. It can't be ignored either, resources are not only needed for fuel and repairs, but are also required to further upgrade your ship upon death.

3 DEATH IS ONLY KIND OF THE END

Everspace is all about forward progression. You are constantly trying to move through gorgeous Unreal Engine 4-rendered space systems, each of which is represented as a series of nodes – not unlike *FTL* – that contain warp points to move you on further in your adventure. The further you progress, the tougher the game becomes. Death resets your progress, but that isn't the end. Upon death you are given the opportunity to spend your credits on ship upgrades and tweaks, before you begin another run; credits don't carry over, however, so you are encouraged to collect and spend as much as possible every time you pick up and play.

4 EVERSPACE HAS SOME OBVIOUS INFLUENCES

It's clear what *Everspace* is shooting for here and we are liking the results. Fans of games set in the lonely locale that is space should notice a strong nod towards two of Chris Roberts' old games – *Starlancer* and *Freelancer*. The introduction of *FTL*-type progression and resource management is interesting too, though Rockfish is clearly struggling to find the right balance between arcade and simulation disciplines. We seem to be in a place where more and more space-set games are seeing release, but after the overwhelming backlash against *No Man's Sky*, now is certainly the time for a more focused game to swoop in and collect wayward players.

5 WHAT'S NEXT FOR ROCKFISH AND EARLY ACCESS?

Early Access/Game Preview can often go one of two ways: it can show that a game has great potential and leave players wanting more, or it can take a game that already had hype behind it and squander it, with players unable to see the potential past the purposefully unfinished product in front of them. Thankfully, *Everspace* is definitely in the former category and shows every sign of coming out development as a Kickstarter success story. As Rockfish continues working, we need to see the scope of *Everspace* expand – to both get a sense of its larger narrative and longevity outside of the combat and management loop that exists in isolation now.



Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War III

CONCEPT ■ *Dawn Of War III* is a real-time strategy game based around the Warhammer 40K universe, once again focusing on the plight of the Space Marines against factions such as the Eldar and Orks.

A careful balancing act

D*awn Of War III* wants you to focus on the bigger picture over the finer details. That's a philosophy that extends past the game's (obviously contentious) aesthetics and into the core mechanics and systems of Relic Entertainment's long-awaited sequel. While die-hard 40K fans continue to debate the lack of an appropriately grimdark graphical design, the rest of us are left to appreciate *Dawn Of War III* for what it is – a bloody fun RTS that's building on everything that has come before it.

Getting hands-on with a new build of *Dawn Of War III*, it is best described as a fusion between the first two *Dawn Of War* games, with a focus on powerful hero combat thrown in for good measure. Base-building and huge armies are back in play – if there's anything cooler than seeing a 200-unit Scout Marine army charging Eldar frontlines we don't want to know about it – while a focus on the lightning-fast micromanagement of the genre classic's sequel also makes a hearty return. The result is a challenging, satisfying and exhilarating RTS, but still certain corners of the Warhammer fan base can't get over the graphical trappings. How much of an impact this will have on the last stretch of development (or the game's success upon release), well, it's hard to say.

THE BIG PICTURE

■ IT ISN'T EXACTLY *Total War*, but *Dawn Of War III*'s large population cap means there is always action to micro-manage somewhere on screen – you feel as if you are a commanding an army as opposed to a handful of powerful units. At its heart, *Dawn Of War III* relies on reflex and intuition to find success. This comes at a price, of course, with some of the finer 40K details lost in the fray. Clearly Relic has quite the balancing act on its hands here.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Relic Entertainment
Release: 2017
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

Founded in 1997, Relic Entertainment has long been one of the best and brightest propagators of the real-time strategy genre. Constantly striving for innovation and delivering expertise across both historical and science-fiction videogames, the Relic name has become an authoritative seal of quality on any strategy PC game.

High Point

Company Of Heroes is a modern classic, though it arrived out of nowhere from Relic, with the company proving that it still had plenty to offer in the real-time strategy genre.

Developer History

Homeworld 1999 [PC]
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War 2004 [PC]
Company Of Heroes 2006 [PC]
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War II 2009 [PC]



"We're really trying to create a new game that is part of this Dawn Of War lineage but is also its own game that speaks to audiences today"

PHILIPPE BOULLE, GAME DIRECTOR

RETURN OF BASE BUILDING

LISTEN, BASE BUILDING is back but it isn't going to change the world. It's a simplistic affair, though it certainly brings a greater sense of agency to the creation of your army. Gathering Requisition and Power from Resource Point spots will allow you to gradually expand your tech trees, pushing you ever-closer to wielding enough influence to unlock the 200 population cap. Battles are suitably chaotic and varied, with action splashed across the map in an impressive fashion.

THE HERO CONUNDRUM

THERE'S A HUGE focus on hero combat in *Dawn Of War III*, and each feels like a distinct force, wielding the ability to turn the tide of a battle. That's fairly in tune with the tabletop game, though the way they are handled here is raising eyebrows. Should the Blood Raven's commander, brandishing a giant hammer in Terminator armour, be able to unleash a punishing leap smash? The fans say no, but we can't help but be taken in by the extreme power of such a move.

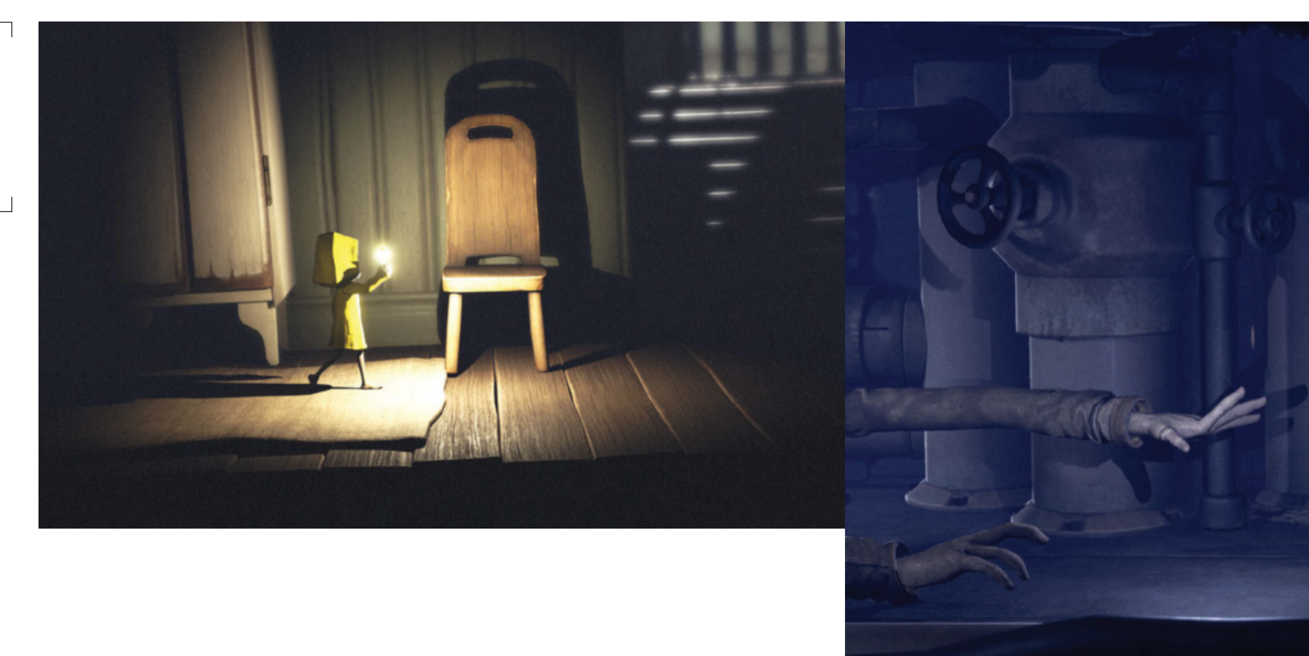
> "I think one of our game designers said it best after Gamescom, 'finally we've achieved unsustainable levels of hype"

OLA HOLMDAHL, TARSIER STUDIOS

GRIMM OUTLOOK

THERE ARE TWO key things that are making *Little Nightmares* a game to watch; the art style and the dark atmosphere. We asked Tarsier CEO Ola Holmdahl about how this came about. "We call this a suspense adventure game, because clearly it's not a gory game, it's not full of certain horror tropes," he explained. "Overcoming challenges and making challenges playful and cool and interesting is a part of childhood. And so is fear. Being out of your depth and wondering what's going on and how it effects you. So, that's probably the tone you're asking about." We noted it sounds a little like a *Grimm fairytale*. "Certainly and a lot of stories through a lot of history have been that way. They have teeth and they need to have it. It's a dark part of the eye that sees. We're mesmerised with that as a creative entity, I think."

Right: The dark atmosphere and tone of the game is wonderfully realised, bringing to mind great stop-motion animation in the movement and lighting Tarsier has crafted.



Little Nightmares

CONCEPT ■ You play as Six, a young girl trapped in The Maw, a grim and dank place full of menace. You're task is to evade its threats and solve its puzzles to escape.

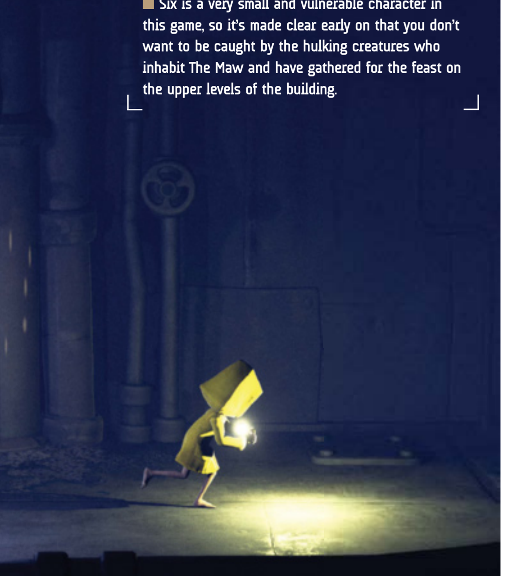
Tarsier CEO Ola Holmdahl talks grim worlds and bright prospects

We feel as if we've been tracking the progress Tarsier Studios for many years, pretty much since it announced a game called *City Of Metronome* in 2005. That title sadly didn't make it out and since then the team has expanded and made a reputation for itself working closely with Media Molecule, a team it shares a lot of creative similarities with. With *Little Nightmares* (previously known as *Hunger*) it is finally stepping out into the light and showing what it can do on a solo project.

As Tarsier has begun showing the game off to gamers at conventions around the world and getting great feedback in the process, we caught up with CEO Ola Holmdahl to reflect on how the studio has developed, how *Little Nightmares* came about and how the lessons of the past are helping to inform this exciting new stage for the team.

What was your background before joining Tarsier?

I'm a game maker in the sense that I started in the mid-Nineties making board games and miniature wargames in Sweden. Then I got into videogames professionally with Refraction Games, which was then purchased by DICE, who made *Battlefield 1942*, on which I was the lead designer. After that I went back to university and taught game design for a number of years. Then I went into entrepreneurship and making games again because it's just too exciting to make the games. Talking about them and reading about them and researching is just not the same.



■ Six is a very small and vulnerable character in this game, so it's made clear early on that you don't want to be caught by the hulking creatures who inhabit The Maw and have gathered for the feast on the upper levels of the building.

There have been a few Tarsier projects that nearly happened, like *City Of Metronome* some years ago, and *Little Nightmares* seems to be coming from a similar aesthetic. Can you speak to that?

This is coming straight out of the Tarsier DNA as a studio. Even as Team Tarsier before Tarsier Studios was founded as a corporate entity, these were the themes and visuals and storytelling desires that were within a lot of the founders.

Could you talk us through the art direction a little then and where that's come from?

What can I say? Tarsier by now is not six people, we're 50 and the team is not that many but it's significant and I do feel everyone contributes to this game, which is why when we look at it, it does look unique and different from everything we've done before. The core subject matter and the core aesthetic is powerfully influenced from our art director, Per Bergman, who is one of the founders and also one of the concept artists we've picked up on the way, Jonas Berlin. They were a fantastic tag team. The core idea of the game came from a sort of a concept jam where Per drew a character, which was just a small girl in a yellow raincoat, very distinct, and Jonas was drawing these figures, these hulking, monstrous figures and there was a very interesting interplay between them.

How important has the experience of working alongside Media Molecule been on the team?

Hugely influential. I think Tarsier as a studio owes them a great debt. There was just a good energy that came out of the very early work with costumes and art support work, but then that we could grow in that relationship to be taken on as a lead studio with *LittleBigPlanet* on Vita of course, but also to do what was essentially in my eyes a collaboration with *Tearaway Unfolded*. They had half the team and we had half the team and we sort of translated the experience from handheld inputs to PS4. They were very specific, they asked for us by name and said 'we'd love to work with Tarsier again', and they said, 'we want some fresh thinking, some fresh energy, some fresh creative juice to make it a unique experience this time around'. We've learnt a lot of discipline from them and a lot of useful creative skills that they still set the bar for, I feel, how to identify a concept, bring it to life, and feel out what the game is that goes with the concept. Those were shortcomings back in 2006 and one of the reasons why *Metronome* never took off. Well, fool me once… I think Tarsier has learnt a lot of good lessons since then.

Has it helped to be somewhat out of the limelight on these brands, just get the work done and do well without pressure?

We have a little small sort of commando fanbase I feel. It's amazing and there are people who remember *Metronome*, even today. But then again, just look at our totem, the tarsier, it's the only mammal with individual eyeballs larger than its brain. And it's nocturnal and very shy. We're about the product. We're not about being rock stars, so yes, we want our own product to be out there, we want to be making our own games. It's fantastic to be working with Bandai Namco and seeing it happen and seeing the response, but we want the product to be the thing, not the team behind it.

And the response so far seems to have been very good. How has that been?

It's been overwhelmingly positive. And we couldn't have asked for more. If you sat down and decided what is the best imaginable scenario, I don't think we could have done much better. I was thinking about it before, clearly I think one of our game designers said it best after Gamescom, 'finally we've achieved unsustainable levels of hype'. And that can be motivating, because we have a lot to live up to. It's fantastic to see people excited by the visuals, excited by the concept, by the trailers and then they come and play it and they walk away with a very big look on their face. They're stricken or they're happy or just absorbed. That, to me, feels very good. That they can queue up, play the thing and seem so mesmerised and happy afterwards.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: Tarsier Studios
Release: Q2 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 2004, Tarsier has quietly been building a reputation for itself as a creative and imaginative studio, assisting Media Molecule on both the *LittleBigPlanet* and *Tearaway* titles with DLC and ports to new hardware. This will be its most high-profile solo release though.

Developer History

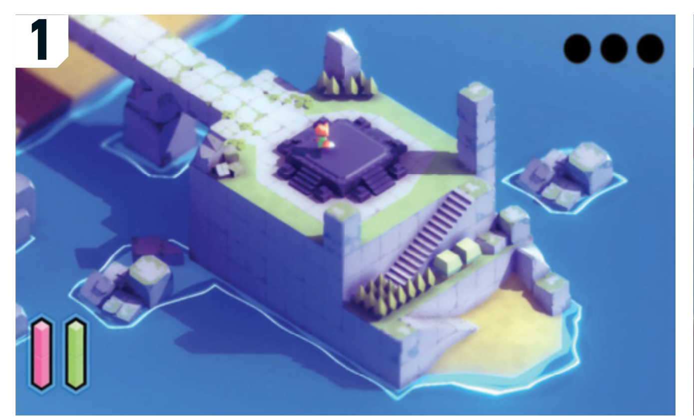
Desert Diner **2009 [PC]**
Rag Doll Kung Fu: Fists Of Plastic **2009 [PS3]**
LittleBigPlanet PS Vita **2012 [Vita]**
Tearaway Unfolded **2015 [PS4]**

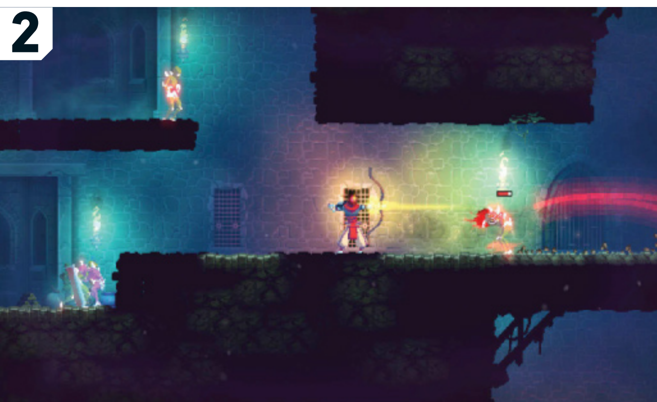
High Point

Rather than acting as a support team, Tarsier was practically the co-developer on *Tearaway Unfolded* as Media Molecule adapted its PS Vita experience to the PS4.

SHOWCASE

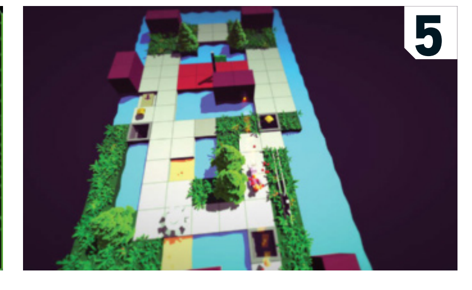
MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON


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SECRET LEGEND

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Dicey**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

1 Reminding us a little of 3D Dot Game Heroes, *Secret Legend* is a wonderful homage to classic *Legend Of Zelda*, reimagined through the prism of voxels, an isometric viewpoint, tilt shift camera and a small fox as a hero. The stylistic choices are really what set this game apart though as the sense of scale is sold with some gusto thanks to the blurred outer reaches of the screen in this game. It's as if you're peering down on the game world like a god, orchestrating events. So while there is plenty of whimsy to appreciate from the bright colours and cute designs, this larger viewpoint promises a world full of potential challenges.

DEAD CELLS

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Motion Twin**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

2 It's always interesting when a game concept evolves into something new post-announcement and so it is with *Dead Cells*, which has morphed from co-op tower-defence survival game into a roguelike metroidvania. What hasn't really changed is a commitment to high-detail pixelart and some great animation. You play as what has been described as a 'blob of cells' who can possess the body of a corpse and use whatever weapon it happens to be holding at the time. Thankfully the upgrades you find will be waiting for you in the dungeons ahead. Bottom line, this game may have shifted focus, but it looks like a lot of fun.

TOKYO DARK

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **Cherrymochi**
ETA: **Q4 2016**

3 Playing as Detective Itō, *Tokyo Dark* is putting the narrative of a horror adventure in your hands. Mixing some classic noir style with some familiar visual novel formatting and character design, you get to pick a path through this creepy, neon-lit world, investigating the mysteries that are hiding down its dark alleyways. Puzzles, stat management and challenging choices will lay ahead of you as the point and click sections promise to offer much-needed interactivity. So far, Cherrymochi's title is looking very promising, so it's no surprise Square Enix has picked it up for its Collective program.

JACK MOVE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **So Romantic**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

4 Harking back to Squaresoft titles of old in its structure, combat mechanics and level layout, but mixing it with some cyberpunk settings and perhaps even some hints of *Shadowrun* in a way, *Jack Move* is a wonderfully lo-fi approach to bringing some western flavour to the JRPG formula. While many of the trappings of the game are deliberately simplified in their aesthetic, *Jack Move* is actually a pretty nice-looking pixelart game with some fantastic lighting effects, plenty of rain and some really nice animation. Combat is all turned based, conversations text based and the threat mega corporation based.

TRAPPER'S DELIGHT

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Shrimpcave Industries**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

5 We appear to be seeing a few more games like this that might be best described as the beginning of a Trolling genre. The whole point of such experiences appears to be to infuriate and annoy your friends and fellow players with the most convoluted and unfair challenges possible. *Trapper's Delight* proposes the simple enough task of reaching the exit, but how you choose to place traps, springboards, turrets and more between players and that exit is up to you. It's already available on Early Access. We can't wait to see what the community will make with the toolset and to see the designs that the players begin coming up with.



VR FOR THE PEOPLE

AS PLAYSTATION VR ESTABLISHES ITSELF AS THE LATEST VIRTUAL REALITY HARDWARE ON THE MARKET, WE PLAY THE GAMES AND TALK WITH THE GAME DEVELOPERS WHO ARE MAKING IT THE MOST EXCITING HARDWARE LAUNCH IN YEARS

This is what we've been waiting for. The promise of VR has been hovering around us for the last few years, teasing us with the possibility of a paradigm shift in the way we play games. But while most of our attention has been focused on Oculus Rift and HTC Vive, it turns out it's actually PlayStation VR that may hold the key to unlocking virtual reality's potential and breaking it into the mainstream. As Sony's device finds a foothold in the world, we tested it extensively, played every launch game and sat down with key developers to see just how much of an impact Sony's newest hardware could really have.

The first step, though, was learning what it takes to make a VR game in the first place, as developers are challenged to work on a platform that's really like nothing else they've had to handle before. "*Battlezone* is the game I've probably spent the most pre-production time on in my career," senior producer James Valls tells us as we discuss one of PSVR's more robust releases. "The team realised very early on that many things that we took for granted from our extensive experience working on a variety of games – these things weren't really applicable to VR. So we had to spend a lot of time re-learning the basics and tailoring the experience for VR." »


VR



CINEMA MODE

THE VR EXPERIENCE YOU DIDN'T EVEN KNOW YOU WANTED

■ One of the lesser-appreciated elements of using PlayStation VR is that it can enhance your experience of games you already own. By using the headset with non-VR titles, you can play in Cinema mode, creating a virtual cinema-scope screen in the headset. Playing titles through Cinema mode is like getting to play them on a gigantic TV. This mode also works for watching Blu-rays and streaming services like Netflix. It's an extraordinarily immersive experience, although the resolution of the screens on the headset can make things look a little grainy. It's worth trying out regardless.

Once those lessons have been learned though, applying them across the devices appears to be a relatively straightforward undertaking. "Obviously the high-end PC is more powerful than the closed ecosystem of the PlayStation 4, but that said, the PS4 is a very capable piece of hardware," according to nDreams' vice president of development Tom Gillo. "It was an engineering task – we had to do some optimisation – but overall for *The Assembly* we stabilised a build with Unreal about six weeks out from launch."

Andrew Willans, lead game designer on *EVE: Valkyrie* had a similar experience as CCP Games looked to bridge the divide between devices. "Surprisingly, from a game design perspective, it was reasonably easy, because we had to have parity across all platforms," he explains, *EVE: Valkyrie* being the first VR title to offer a cross-platform experience through the Joint Strike mode. "If you're making a competitive multiplayer shooter, it's got to be the same game."

Alongside this the other key priority has been optimisation of performance. Unlike with other console games, a little drop in frame-rate in a VR game can result in a pretty horrible experience for the player. "Ensuring a stable frame-rate at 60fps is a given for PSVR, so that wasn't a technical consideration that was up for compromise, we knew we had to deliver that without question," says Dax Ginn, Rocksteady's brand marketing producer, as we discuss *Batman: Arkham VR*. "For us, *Batman: Arkham VR* needed to feel like a 'next-gen' game so we overhauled our facial-scanning processes in order to give us much more realistic character features and facial animation. Making a full transition to Unreal Engine 4 also enabled us to increase the quality of our lighting and effects, which makes a huge difference to the visual quality of the game. We also set benchmarks in terms of gameplay interaction. It was important to us that this was not just a passive experience and that we were offering gamers genuine gameplay interactions."

The very important question this brings up though is whether or not the PS4 and PlayStation VR are actually capable of delivering the kind of high-end VR experiences that Oculus Rift and HTC Vive have shown are possible on high-end PCs. As the cheapest device on the market, there's an expectation that PSVR is the lesser cousin of this first gen of VR hardware.

"There's never really been an issue," insists Willans. "We've maybe needed to look at player numbers, AI numbers, just to make sure that we're hitting the right FPS. It's something that, to be honest, we would do from a gameplay perspective anyway. You quickly learn that when you put in a co-op mode and you're going to fight against the AI, there's a limit and you don't want to go over that limit anyway, because you would get absolutely swamped."

"One way that I've seen it described online is the difference between the PS2 and the original Xbox," nDreams communications manager George Kelion tells us. "Between PlayStation VR and HTC Vive, sure there's a difference, but not so big a difference to be a generational leap, which is a lot of what the community was expecting. And it certainly has no impact on the kind of experiences you can deliver. All of these generation one headsets are ultimately the same generation."

And working on PS4 has some innate advantages according to Gillo. "I would say that because with PlayStation you have that fixed target, in lots of ways as a developer that's a nice thing to have because it's a closed ecosystem and it's static. We started out on *The Assembly* with the PC version of it, but comparatively the amount of testing we would have had to do and the comparative amount of work we would have to do, it's certainly harder on the PC."

> Obviously the high-end PC is more powerful than the closed ecosystem of the PlayStation 4, but that said, the PS4 is a very capable piece of hardware

So it seems that PlayStation VR has its strengths and weaknesses like any other piece of hardware, so what's really going to set it apart from the other devices out there (besides it price point) is going to be its games. We would recommend taking a look at the full launch lineup of PSVR and just trying to work out how many different genres or types of game it has to offer; it's one of the most diverse and rich launches we can remember, offering something for so many different types of gamers. But it does have the look of a scattergun approach to game-making, so the question that rises is: what works best in VR and what doesn't?

"The design team had to create gameplay systems from scratch after quickly realising that a lot of the mechanics that we have used for our previous Batman games did not translate into VR," Ginn admits to us. "Our early experimentation with combat and realistic navigation proved very quickly to result in a pretty uncomfortable experience for the gamer.

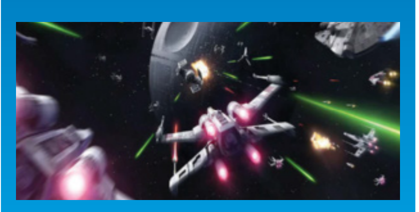
"With these learnings at hand, we committed ourselves to focusing on the strengths of VR as a technology and we aimed to create games that make players feel like the World's Greatest Detective."

"I think the boundaries are being torn down quite quickly," is Willans assessment. "I didn't expect first- »

VR GAMES TO WATCH

STAR TREK: BRIDGE CREW

Doing for fans of Captain Kirk what *Arkham VR* is doing for fans of Batman, *Star Trek Bridge Crew* is placing you and your friends in the command posts of a Starfleet vessel as you seek out new life and new civilisations. It promises to be very interesting indeed.



STAR WARS: X-WING VR MISSION

Rebranded to tie in closely with the release of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, Battlefront's VR X-Wing mission is the kind of cockpit experience everyone has been waiting for. It may not prove as robust as the likes of *EVE: Valkyrie*, but it's exciting all the same.



FATED: THE SILENT OATH

Leaning more towards narrative than gameplay, this first person RPG experience sees you play the role of a father trying to save his family from an attack by titans in a Viking-themed setting. It's got a really nice art style and has already proved popular on the convention circuit.



HOW WE SOAR

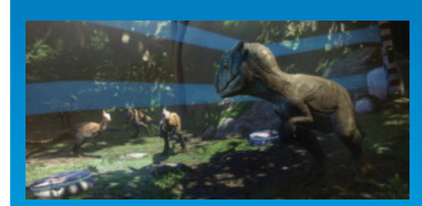
The fact that this game is made by some former team members of Free Radical and Crytek will likely be enough to gain some interest as the much-loved dev team has splintered to many different projects. This one is a all about experiencing flight on the back of a Phoenix.

VR GAMES TO WATCH



PIXEL RIPPED 1989

This game within a game experience blurs reality and retro gaming nostalgia together to let you play some classic handheld titles that spill out into the real world. Primarily what you're trying to do is get away with playing games in a classroom without being spotted, but things change swiftly.



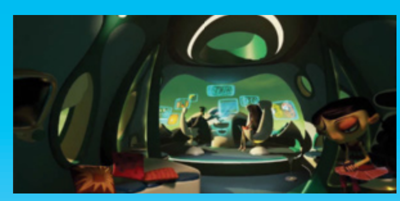
ROBINSON: THE JOURNEY

While the scale of this game is pretty huge, your interaction with it is kept very personal and contained. Playing *Robinson,* you can't help but be dazzled by its dinosaurs and presentation. Will it have enough gameplay to keep you hooked? That's the key question for us.



WINDLANDS

In what could either be the greatest implementation of VR or the most foolproof way to make everyone throw up using it, Windland sees you swinging and leaping between floating islands like Spider-Man making a guest appearance in *Grow Home.*



PSYCHONAUTS IN THE RHOMBUS OF RUIN

Bridging the events of *Psychonauts* with the fully funded and under-development *Psychonauts 2, Rhombus Of Ruin* is a first-person experience where you can leap between the minds of the various characters, solving puzzles and interacting with objects.

person shooters, free-standing, to deliver for a long time. In my head as a gamer, I was really passionate and really wanted this to happen, but will it happen? I don't know.

"Then I played *Onward* (by Downpour Interactive). They've kind of mastered that movement within VR where you're stood up and you use the Vive controllers to pick up your gun and you can actually put in a magazine. Everything feels very intuitive. It lacks the polish at the moment, it's still in development and in an alpha state, but they've done wonders with the movement. It's bizarre, because it's almost like the roadie run from *Gears Of War,* where your shoulders leaning forward pushes you in the direction you want to go and you move with momentum. It feels very instinctive, and that kind of floored me, because I thought that we had got to this position a lot quicker than I thought we would have."

> The sense of immersion you get with a good VR experience is simply indescribable

What we have yet to see is what might be considered a triple-A title. *Batman: Arkham VR* has spun off from its main series and *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* offers a standalone experience in the form of *Blood Ties*, but how far away might fully fledged blockbuster games be from arriving on PSVR? "Only time will tell. However, at this early stage I don't see any reason why VR won't be able to support longer-duration games than we are currently seeing at launch," says Ginn. Meanwhile, Valls wonders if triple-A might be too imprecise a term to apply to VR at the moment. "What do we mean by triple-A? Is it price? Is it genre? Is it having a campaign of 'X' hours? I think PSVR's launch line up is one of the most varied of any new platform or console."

Valls continues, "We weren't worrying about definitions of 'indie' or 'triple-A' or anything. I think there will be room for all sorts of games in VR, maybe even experiences that are completely new."

Which for *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*'s chief technology officer Gary Snethen brings up an interesting comparison. "As with smartphones and tablets, VR will open an entirely new space in the games market."

We put this comparison to some of the other developers to see if they thought the current state of VR development was akin to game-makers mastering the intricacies of touchscreen devices and gradually moving away from forcing old genres onto a new piece of technology.

"When I made a mobile game I wanted to recreate a digital pad, but without that tactile sensation there's something that's just never, ever working and that's where we are in VR, hammering out what works and what doesn't," Willans tells us. "It is exactly like the early days of the smartphone where you're trying to replicate what you think you know and you're not actually embracing what the technology can deliver," Gillo agrees. "Understandably, we've all been working on new hardware and learning on the job. Inevitably that first round of games is going to be good, but it will be version 2.0 and 3.0 that really come to understand the hardware, the control methodologies, and what works and what doesn't."

But even if these early titles will be comparatively tentative compared to what's to come, the immersion of the VR experience means that





Switching between the DualShock 4 and Move controllers could have been frustrating, but being able to easily lift the visor from your eyes means dropping out of VR for a moment is no trouble at all.

almost everything still has some value to it that feels fresh and transportive. This is why we're all getting so excited about VR right now; it's a wholly new way of experiencing games and the ultimate quality of releases is almost second to that thrill. "The sense of immersion you get with a good VR experience is simply indescribable," says Valls. "We have got to a point where we are able to create experiences that feel real to the player. This is something that was impossible not long ago."

It's difficult to overstate the importance of this element of VR, which does separate it from smartphones and touchscreen gaming significantly. Those devices didn't change the way we perceived game worlds, just opened up more complex mechanics for a mobile platform. VR takes you to other worlds. The 360-degree engagement that these devices offer is unlike anything we've seen before, and PlayStation VR is as good as anything else available in this respect, not least because it can offer that important additional element of one-for-one motion control too through PlayStation Move controllers.

"In our minds, the core promise of VR hinges upon the idea of independent movement of each of the player's hands," Ginn tells us. "There were very few restrictions associated with designing for the Move controllers and we looked to capitalise on their functional potential wherever possible. One of the earliest feature implementations was the ability to pick up, hold and throw a batarang, and we were pretty amazed at how intuitive it felt using the triggers on the Move controllers."

"I will say the other two high-end manufacturers have got the edge in terms of controller," Gillo says. "There is no question that the Move controller is not as capable as the Touch or Vive controller. That is its limitation right now, but there are a lot of experiences that will be great with a DualShock 4."

Considering the age of the tech though (PlayStation Move was released in 2010), the Move controllers do work rather well with VR, giving you the kind of tactile experience that helps to elevate VR scenarios to the next level. Picking up objects, wielding weapons and generally touching the virtual world is such an important tool to have in your belt for this new frontier of development.

Which brings us to the device itself. We've heard from our developers here that PlayStation VR isn't quite as powerful as its competitors, but not by much. It's still able to handle pretty much everything Oculus Rift and HTC Vive can, and thanks to the closed ecosystem of the PS4, developing for the device might actually be a little bit easier. But what about that headset? How does that hold up as a piece of consumer design? "Ergonomically, personally, it's my favourite from a pure physical design perspective," Gillo informs us. "Which we should expect really as Sony is up against two companies who aren't really known for consumer hardware. Valve obviously partnered with HTC, but industrial design isn't necessarily their powerhouse. With Sony industrial design is par for the course." »

Left: With all of the additional kit needed to make PSVR work, the overall price can jump up by another £100 for newcomers, but good bundle offers are available.

WHAT DOES PS4 PRO ADD?

SONY'S NEXT LEVEL CONSOLE HAS A VR PUNCH

While PlayStation VR works perfectly well on all PS4 models, we're all expecting a slightly better experience from the device through the PS4 Pro. Why? Because the Pro is capable of outputting visuals at higher resolutions without compromising frame rate, which in turn is one of the major challenges of VR development as games need to send out every image twice. It will be up to developers to take advantage of the additional processing power PS4 Pro offers, so it could mean higher resolutions with stable frame rates, improved frame rates with the same visuals, more objects or particle effects enabled with the Pro, or better draw distances.





"I think that halo is more than likely to be replicated by other headsets," adds Gillo's colleague Kelion. "We don't know anything about that, but it seems like a fairly obvious way to go. It looks cool as well. It looks really cool. Like it's from Tron." He's absolutely right though; the design of the halo headband from which the HMD (head-mounted display) is suspended means that the weight of the device is distributed more evenly over your head and not strapped to the front of your face, weighing on your cheekbones and brow. It actually makes PSVR the most comfortable device to wear and makes extended playtimes far more practical.

It sets up PSVR nicely to take advantage of the things that make virtual reality generally so exciting. "As soon as you flip on that visor, you are involved in that world, you're a part of it," enthuses Willans. "So you'll see a lot of things in *Valkyrie,* and in a lot of games that are successful in VR, its that the immersion starts from the minute you put that headset on." For others, though, the real excitement is that VR is no longer an aim or promise, but reality. "From a commercial point of view, the fact that it's all out there is pretty important," says Gillo. "We've all been working for three years or more and to have all of the headsets out in the market is a really good thing. And long may that continue and may those numbers grow because that's obviously super important for anyone who is creating content."

"We've been testing these things for a while and it's hard to get yourself back into the mindset of trying it for the first time," admits Kelion. "I've given hundreds of people their first VR experience at various expos and what have you and every single time their jaw goes slack and they're like, 'Oh my God'. That's where most people are."

There's also a sense from the developers we've spoken to that this is VR's time to shine, not just because the tech is out, but because it's entering into a media landscape that's ready to embrace it. Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One* was name-checked by many we spoke with as a reference to

The PlayStation Move controllers, though older tech, hold up incredibly well for motion tracking titles and are really essential to the wider PlayStation VR experience.



HOW DOES PSVR STAND UP TO THE COMPETITION







	PlayStation VR	HTC Vive	Oculus Rift
Headset cost	£349.99	£759	£549
Resolution (per screen)	960 x 1080	1080 x 1200	1080 x 1200
Refresh rate	120Hz, 90Hz	90Hz	90Hz
Field of view	Approx 100 degrees	Approx 110 degrees	Approx 100-110 degrees
Weight	610g	555g	470g
Additional controllers	Move: £68.99 (Twin pack)	N/A	Oculus Touch: £190
Additional hardware	PS Camera: £39	N/A	N/A
Platform cost	PS4: £249.99-349.99	PC: £750-2,000	PC: £750-2,000


Asymmetrical VR gaming isn't being used much yet, but offers some of the most exciting gaming experiences since it opens up VR to a social environment.

the VR experience and it was noted that a Hollywood adaptation from Steve Spielberg on the way is only likely to enhance interest. "*Ready Player One* is going to be a movie about an aspirational piece of tech that you can literally go out to the shop the next day and buy and take home," Kelion points out. "That's never happened before and I think that really will shift the needle."

So PlayStation VR is in a good spot. The timing is right for VR, it has some great games on it, the tech is nicely designed and its technical limitations are not genuine impediments to design, by all accounts. The other key is that the price point, while not cheap by any means, puts it within touching distance of a lot more of us than some of the competition. "I'm not saying it's going to do a Wii in terms of sales, but everyone is going to have that friend with VR," is Kelion's assessment. "And it might be like that for the first year, that everyone has their mate who has VR, but I think it's almost inevitable. The experience is such a jaw-dropping one. You can't really put it into words."

> I'm not saying it's going to do a Wii in terms of sales, but everyone is going to have that friend with VR

It all paints a rather enticing picture of what PlayStation VR makes possible for virtual reality and gaming going forward. "We truly are at the dawn of a new age in entertainment, and it's only a matter of time before headsets will become wireless, resolution will increase and experiences will become even more realistic," Valls tells us. "I'm also really looking forward to new technologies such as Ultrahaptics (using ultrasounds to give you a sense of touch in midair) that will enhance the VR experience even further."

Willans has his sights set on something more practical in the near future. "The next mission as a designer is that we have all of these devices, how do we then create a game that tailors itself to your device, so when I'm playing on one platform it reacts and all my interactions are correct because I'm using Touch controllers or Move controllers? When I'm using a DualShock, my inputs are correct. Is there a way that we can create a game that can spot everything? A game that says if you want to be active in this world and a gamer in this world, we're not saying you have to have these devices specifically."

"It's like when a new console launches, that first round of games has only just gone through that baptism of fire," says Gillo. "When we then follow up with our second generation and third generation games, you'll really start to see us milk that system. I'd be surprised if it isn't the dominant platform for the next 12 to 18 months, just because of the price point."

"In real terms, the dream is massively multiplayer online games in VR and we're not that far away from it," suggests Kelion. "How it actually works in moment-to-moment gameplay, there are a lot of issues to be solved, but we're not staring down the barrel of technological innovations that are preventing us from realising it."

We don't know about you, but the leap into this eighth generation of consoles was a little anti-climactic. We are enjoying a lot of the games, graphics look better than ever and the additional processing power seems to be going to great use, but we've not felt a real change in direction. Under such circumstances, we haven't seen much real originality or innovation, but with VR, that feels as if it's about to change.

"I'm not saying we've achieved everything you can do on a flat screen, but it's much harder now to be wholly original and wholly innovative than it was 15 years ago," Kelion agrees. "For an industry that needs a lot of novelty and a lot of innovation, VR is a massive shot in the arm." And perhaps most importantly, he believes developers are ready and eager to take advantage of the moment. "In the last three years everyone has been thinking about today. And now we can all unclench a little and start to think about what the next three years look like." »

VR GAMES TO WATCH



RESIDENT EVIL VII
If there's one VR experience that's likely to make headlines with regards to gamers suffering health issues as a result of playing it, then Capcom's reinvention of *Resident Evil* might be it. This immersive horror title is looking incredible in VR right now.



GOLEM
The Highwire Games team includes developers from 343, Bungie, Valve and Airtight Games, which we mention only to highlight that this game where you control ever-increasing sizes of stone golem is a game with pedigree. It's a real looker too.



GNOG
We're loving the approach developers are taking to puzzle games in VR, and *GNOG* is one of the most fun – as you explore a series of 3D monster heads, each needs you to use a different interaction to unlock the secrets within. It looks weird and actually rather wonderful.



STATIK
The Tarsier team is hard at work on *Little Nightmares*, but this amusing and mildly terrifying puzzle game has us equally enthralled. It's another fun puzzle experience that involves playing around with inputs to find the answer. Keep a close eye out for this one.

PLAYSTATION VR VERDICT

BREAKING DOWN THE HEADSET AND OFFERING OUR FINAL ASSESSMENT

CABLES

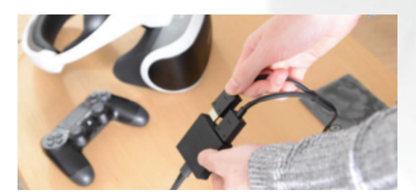
As with all the VR headsets on the market at the moment, there are a lot of cables to navigate, but they're certainly not as heavy as the ones on the HTC Vive. Clearing some room for everything and occasionally untangling wires is going to be important though.

CURTAINS

Since the headset isn't strapped to your face it doesn't really need foam padding to secure it tightly around your eyes. In its stead, Sony has a rubber curtain that blocks out light from above and from the sides. This is much more comfortable around the face.

PLAYSTATION VR SETUP TIPS

IT'S SIMPLE ENOUGH TO SET PSVR UP, BUT THERE ARE SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND



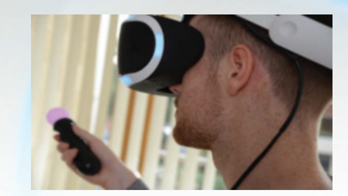
FOLLOW THE GUIDE

1 Stating the blindingly obvious here, but make sure you follow the setup guide provided to the letter. Sony has helpfully labelled all of the cables and the processor unit so it should all go together pretty smoothly. Think of the processor as a pass-through unit. HDMI goes in from PS4 and then out to the TV for visuals. USB links the unit to the PS4 for sharing information. And then it links to the headset.



CAMERA PLACEMENT

2 Since the camera is tracking the lights on the front of the PSVR headset, be aware of light sources in the camera's line of sight that might interfere with this. It's recommended that the camera be placed about six feet from your position, whether seated or standing. Make sure the camera is secured in place so it doesn't get knocked or move around, as this can be very disorientating inside the headset. Also, don't feel tied to it being on top or below the TV, it can go anywhere so long as you can face it wearing the visor.



CLEAR DISTRACTING LIGHTS

3 Whether it's a lamp or a reflective surface like a mirror or a cabinet window, make sure that you either move potential light sources out of the way or move the camera so that it doesn't face them. Any shiny surface might prove a challenge for the PlayStation camera.



HEADBAND

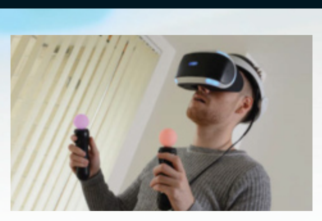
What we're calling the halo design of this headset is really its key design strength, putting all of the weight of the device around the top of your head. The button at the rear unlocks the stretch mechanism to fit it around your head and the wheel allows for fine tuning of tightness once you're wearing it.

VISOR

In contrast to its competitors, Sony has gone for a hanging visor design for its VR headset rather than the goggle style you see with Oculus Rift and HTC Vive. This means that the device doesn't sit on your face so much as it sits on top of your head and hangs down.

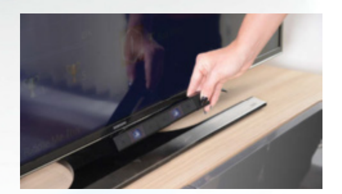
LENS

The button underneath releases the visor to move it closer to your face. It's worth bearing in mind that we found that the lenses being close is only one factor in making pictures clear while wearing the headset. Lens height is also important, so try moving the visor up and down a little as well as closer to your eyes.



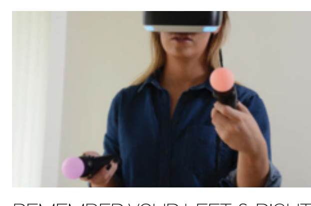
KEEP IT DARK(ISH)

4 There's no need to play PSVR in the dark, but low-level light should make it easier for the PlayStation camera to pick up the headset lights and the PlayStation Move controllers. During daylight, depending on how close you are to a window, you might want to consider closing curtains or blinds too.



MOVE THE CAMERA

5 Be ready to move the camera depending on what game you're playing and what position you're in. Seated games may be best with the camera in a low position, for instance. Games played standing will probably need the camera to be as close to head height as possible (on top of a TV should work fine).



REMEMBER YOUR LEFT & RIGHT

6 We highly recommend using a gaming headset with PSVR as it helps to complete the immersion of the experience. When putting on a headset, remember to place the left and right cups correctly. Putting a headset on without checking this can become very confusing when playing a fully immersive game.

VERDICT

PlayStation VR is a pretty amazing piece of kit. For the price it offers a fidelity of image and quality of experience that far exceeded our expectations. It's also at a price point that puts it just about in reach for a lot of us, although admittedly it's still pretty pricey.

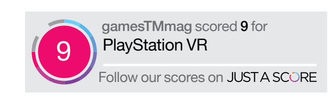
In terms of build quality it's not quite as sturdy feeling or high-quality as the HTC Vive. The plastic feels a little cheap and some of the mechanisms are a little clicky and basic. But this is all in the name of keeping the price down, so the compromise seems like a fair one.

More important than the build quality for us, though, is the design of the whole unit, which is incredibly smart. The balance of the device using the halo headset to carry the weight is ingenious. It makes the PSVR headset much more comfortable to wear, especially for extended play sessions, since you don't have foam sitting against your cheeks and forehead making you sweat.

The fact that the camera motion tracking and Move controllers are light based does mean that any little bits of light interference can cause issues, and in VR, flicker or stutter can be very uncomfortable. However in terms of overall comfort while playing and issues of dizziness or nausea, we would suggest that's entirely down to your own inner-ear balance. If you're someone who gets motion sick at all whether playing games or just out in the world, PSVR, no more or less than other VR, is something to be careful with. If you rarely suffer such issues, you will likely have little trouble with this device.

Overall, with its diverse launch titles and high-quality experience, PSVR doesn't feel like much of a compromise in the face of price. Sony has done a pretty amazing job of delivering something genuinely competitive on an experience level as well as something that won't make your bank balance scream.

It still feels as if the best of what VR can be is a little bit further down the line, but PSVR is the first really approachable version of the tech and it has some incredible things to experience if you can get on board.





PlayStation **VR**

MECHA ACTIVATED

RIGS: Mechanized Combat League

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** Guerrilla Cambridge | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £49.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1-6 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No



Developers have been theorising on the future of sports for decades, but almost every effort falls in to the same trap – simple abstractions of existing sports usually end up more convoluted and less engaging than games that are based on the actual sport, while deviating too much from the traditional can often create issues with accessibility.

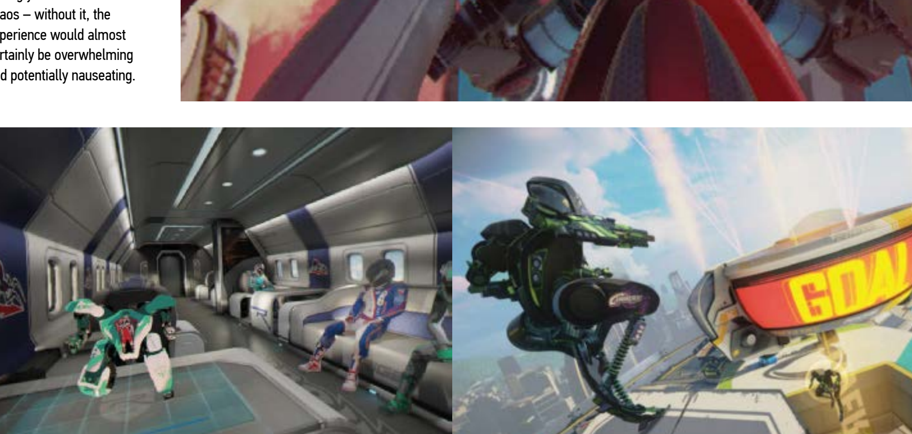
Those few games that have succeeded in this field have typically had one thing in common – simplicity. Just like the compelling carball of *Rocket League*, all of RIGS's three-on-three game modes are easy to understand and great fun to play, although the complexities of piloting a mech as well as physically dealing with the sensation of darting around arenas at high speed might not come quite so easily.

Of all the PSVR titles currently available, *RIGS* is by far the most intense. An in-game splash screen even warns as much, suggesting easing yourself in with shorter sessions before working up to longer stints, which works really well – after the daunting first few matches, we were soon able to stomach more court time per sitting. Protracted tutorials, intermissions, results screens and menus actually help in this regard, and while their unskippable nature makes them feel frustrating at first, the purpose they serve in offering some needed respite from the game's breakneck pace is likely essential for player comfort. Numerous settings allow you to improve this further, altering control methods, field of view and disabling eject sequence visuals if needed in order to optimise the experience – *RIGS* has the most plentiful suite of comfort options of any PSVR title to date, and it's all the better for it.

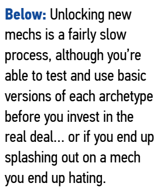
That's just as well too, since despite the simplicity of its concept, the actual act of piloting your mech is one of the most intense and hectic VR experiences we've encountered so far. While fishing for takedowns and chasing balls, you need to keep one eye on your radar and another on your mech's power mode, cycling between movement, combat and healing boosts as the situation demands – it's a lot to juggle and can be overwhelming to begin with, especially if you're also trying to adapt to the unique abilities and weapons of a new mech. Once you fall into a rhythm and settle on a ride you like (or several, ideally – each fills a different role depending on team composition and mode being played), it's enormously satisfying and having mastered the basics against AI opponents, you'll be ready to take the fight online, which is where competition really hots up. You can either go 1v1 with two AI bots each or delve into the chaos of a full three-on-three match, although this demands a lot more communication and coordination, not unlike high-level *Rocket League* play.

Both captivating and original, *RIGS* is a clear standout title in PSVR's launch line-up, not to mention one of the few games available right now that actually feels like a full-featured product rather than a glorified tech demo. The intensity means you'll need to get your VR legs before you can play for extended periods of time, but once you're over that hump, expect to spend more time in the arena than in any other launch game or experience.

Right: Chief enjoys the sound of his voice far too much, although the slow tutorial is important in easing you into the virtual chaos – without it, the experience would almost certainly be overwhelming and potentially nauseating.

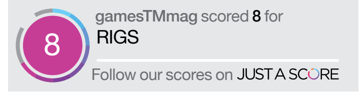


> This game leaves me feeling genuinely exhausted, but oh so satisfied
>
> DARRAN JONES, RETRO GAMER EDITOR

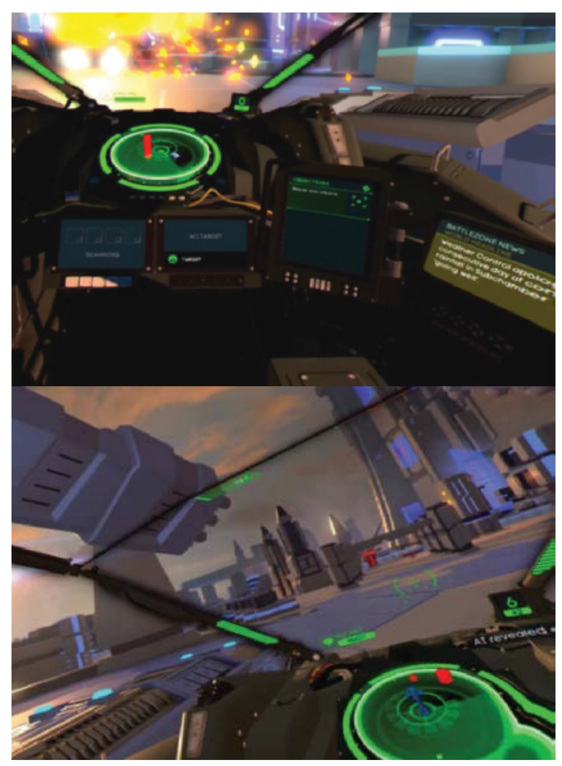


Below: Unlocking new mechs is a fairly slow process, although you're able to test and use basic versions of each archetype before you invest in the real deal… or if you end up splashing out on a mech you end up hating.

VERDICT
PLAYSTATION VR'S CURRENT MVP







Above: It's becoming clear that multiplayer gaming is what's going to keep virtual reality alive until 2017, an area Rebellion has dipped its toes into. *Battlezone* supports four-player co-op, a fun way to waste away your time, so long as you have friends with the appropriate equipment to join you of course.

RETRO REVIVAL IN A FUTURISTIC WORLD

Battlezone

PUBLISHER: Rebellion | **DEVELOPER:** In-house | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £49.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1-4 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No



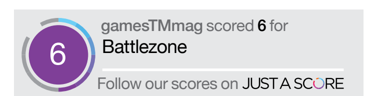
If there's ever an appropriate time to have an existential crisis, we can guarantee it *isn't* as you're clambering into the cockpit of a giant battle tank, as enemy vehicles approach from all sides. But perhaps it speaks to the killer job Rebellion has done here, showcasing how easy it is to build and break immersion in a virtual space.

The scale of the tanks is wildly impressive; the cockpit for each so lovingly deigned and detailed that you'll want to reach and touch everything, though you can't of course – don't expect *Steel Battalion* levels of control over these hulking machines. Then, as you approach conflict – cycling through your various weapon systems – you'll see cannons and energy blasters lock into place outside of the cockpit, crowding your peripheral vision, and you'll feel powerful. Powerful but ineffectual, bemused even, because your pilot doesn't have a body – it's a distracting omission that never quits being strange.

> Being inside of a vehicle this size is exhilarating
>
> JOSH WEST, GAMES™ FEATURES EDITOR

Which is a shame, because *Battlezone* is a pretty solid attempt to bring the legendary arcade game out of the past and into VR. The beautifully evocative low-poly, flat colour graphical spread proves to be a loving update of the vector-wireframe from days gone by, while the tank-to-tank action is simple but intuitive. Enemy AI is basic but that's often offset by the stress of managing ammunition pools, your shields (which can be exchanged for a short boost) and shifting objectives across each of the short procedurally generated campaign missions. *Battlezone* will quickly feel routine, but it's also fun – not to mention an interesting window into the possibilities and pitfalls of virtual reality.

VERDICT
INTERESTING IDEA, THROWAWAY FUN



KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE ROAD

Driveclub VR

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** Evolution Studios | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £29.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

PS VR

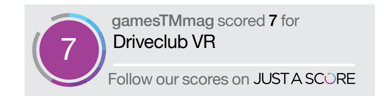
Coming off the back of the beautiful visuals and crisp, clean image quality of the original game, the sacrifices that have had to be made to get *Driveclub VR* running at triple the frame rate are both glaring and jarring. It's all well and good being able to look around at will, but when all you're likely to see is rough aliasing on scenery and fuzzy textures in your peripheral vision, the need and desire to do so simply isn't there. New urban environments box in the action a little more and fare better as a result, but those that have been carried across from the core game just feel a bit rough around the edges… which isn't very *Driveclub*.

It's a shame because the core gameplay is as tight as ever and the actual sensation of blazing around courses in high-end sports cars is generally great. Usability options allow you to alter ride height and closeness to the wheel on a vehicle-by-vehicle basis to ensure maximum comfort, and while the sense of immersion can be enhanced further still by using a wheel peripheral, that's only going to be an option for a particular niche of a niche who have or would buy two expensive peripherals for a single game.

> Taking corners is so much easier to judge than before in VR
>
> DARRAN JONES, RETRO GAMER EDITOR

Content is plentiful and the level of detail in the vehicles remains impressive, as you'll notice when you check out your ride before each race. It's just a shame that most environments don't feel like they're up to the same standard – that of both cars and experience – although that could say more about the difficulty of adapting existing games and assets for VR rather than creating content with the headset in mind.

VERDICT
ROUGH VISUALS DAMPEN ITS IMPACT





Above: Vehicle interiors are suitably detailed, but everything further away is significantly less so – look off into the distance and you almost start to worry about cutting yourself on all those jagged edges.





Above: While it can be completed in 90 minutes, there's a ton of content hidden beneath the surface. Every area is packed with secrets, Easter eggs and mysterious Riddler trophies. Though you could spend a solid hour marvelling at the Batcave and its contents alone.

WIDE EYED AND WEARY

Batman: Arkham VR

PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. | **DEVELOPER:** Rocksteady | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £15.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

PS VR

***Batman: Arkham VR* truly represents the very best and worst virtual reality has to offer – its promise and potential, the restrictions and subsequent resentment that soon follows.** But as Rocksteady's masterful creation so readily and ably demonstrates, VR *can* act as a gateway to another world; confidently blurring our understanding of what is real and what is not. It gifts us the opportunity to be swallowed into a life so far removed from our own that the only applicable response is to just stand there… paralysed, trapped in a state of silent of awe and appreciation.

The limitations are, however, as clearly defined as the strengths themselves. For virtual reality to be truly transcendent, it seems, gameplay must become defiantly rudimentary, confined to claustrophobic spaces in aid of evoking emotional resonance.

This can manifest itself in a number of interesting ways, but it's when the appropriate tools are handed to the right team, one with a clear and critical understanding of what makes a fictional world – and its inhabitants, its essence – work, that the results become truly astounding. As such, *Batman: Arkham VR* is a masterclass in navigating limitations.

It achieves unparalleled immersion in a virtual space, bringing the grit and grime of Gotham City to life in a way that no artist, writer or animator has ever been able to achieve. The problem that *Batman: Arkham VR* clashes with so often across its short running time, however, is that the limited interactions you have with the world seem incongruous with the immense immersion it is actively establishing.

It's undoubtedly shallow; an uncomfortable flashback to an era when motion-controlled gameplay was on the periphery of true innovation in the industry – simple wrist movements to perform simple interactions, it isn't that unlike those first experiences you may have had with the Nintendo Wii, all those years ago. But then the Wii never teleported you into a crime-solving expedition through Gotham, nor, truth be told, did its controller enjoy the same precision of movement as PlayStation's Move sticks do.

> Without question one of the coolest VR experiences available
> JOSH WEST, GAMES™ FEATURES EDITOR

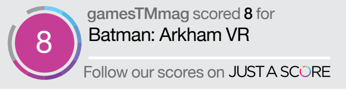
As no console or device has ever truly done in the past this game affords you the opportunity to drape the iconic black cowl over your shoulders. As *Batman: Arkham VR* lets you glance into a mirror for the first time, Bruce Wayne's head moving in tandem with your own, PSVR finally makes sense. For a moment you will truly believe that you are Gotham's Dark Knight; all you'll be able to do is smile; smile as Batman's scowl stares straight back at you.

Above: You should be prepared for this to readily challenge your perception of what may or may not constitute a 'videogame'. *Arkham VR* treads a fine line between cinematic experience and interactive curiosity. Look, it's going to be one of *those* years, welcome to VR.

You have agency in this perfectly paced story, but it feels almost fraudulent – fleeting. For the lifelong *Batman* fan, gazing across the Gotham skyline – feeling the weight of its depressive atmosphere hanging over you – will be enough: enough to justify the price, even enough to fall in love with virtual reality. *Batman: Arkham VR* is an excellent example of what a top-tier development team can achieve in VR when it allows itself to experiment with mechanics. Just a shame about the length.

VERDICT

A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE FOR EVERY BATMAN FAN



INTRODUCING 'RHYTHM VIOLENCE'

Thumper

PUBLISHER: Drool | **DEVELOPER:** In-house | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £15.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

One of the most intense VR experience so far

LUKE ALBIGÉS, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

PS VR

Most rhythm-action games look to ease players in and ensure accessibility by offering easier charts and no-fail modes for those not ready to face Hard or Expert-tier difficulty levels. *Thumper* is not most rhythm-action games. It's relentless, ruthless and uncompromising, its blistering pace, myriad hazards and undulating courses all deviously devised to punish anything less than perfect play. And as frustrating as that can be when the challenge ramps up as quickly as it does, the whole experience is just so intense and unique that you'll recover from every audiovisual kick in the face with a masochistic desire for more.

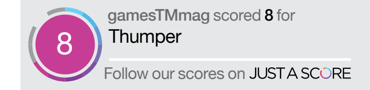
Considering it only uses one button and directional control, Thumper offers a surprising amount of depth and variety as you attempt to match its increasingly complex patterns. You start by simply cornering and hitting floor panels but before long, you're soaring over obstacles, slamming beats for bonuses and rapidly switching lanes, most of which are tricks you can employ when returning to levels earlier than they were introduced to help achieve higher scores. There are also plenty of optional hazards for those looking to push their luck, test their skill and smash the leaderboards, although the safer option is usually the preferable one on a first run.

Brutal in both difficulty and presentation and even more oppressive than usual when you're immersed in this surreal hellish world in VR, *Thumper* truly feels like the kind of game you 'beat' rather than 'finish', a trial to be overcome against all odds. It revels in complex timings and tricky off-beat hits in later stages, more abstract and misleading beats sometimes pushing it closer to memory test than rhythmic challenge, which can be frustrating as passages get pretty long later on. But when it all comes together and you're bashing, slamming and screeching out call-and-response beats, *Thumper* is absorbing, rewarding and utterly unique.

Above: *Thumper*'s simple visuals mean it never even vaguely struggles to maintain fluidity. In fact, a PS4 Pro update down the line will add native 4K support for 2D play without sacrificing frame-rate.



A GLORIOUS ASSAULT ON THE SENSES



A DEFINING MOMENT SPLASHED ACROSS THE STARS

EVE: Valkyrie

PUBLISHER: CCP | **DEVELOPER:** CCP Newcastle | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £49.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1-16 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No



When you slip away, into the deepest of slumbers, where do you go? Are you bound by reality as we know it or do you take to the stars? Does your dreamscape contort into the shape of a Colonial Viper cockpit (Mark II, naturally), or perhaps to one of the gunnery positions on the Millennium Falcon – John Williams' iconic score hitting a near constant crescendo as you twist and twirl through battle? If it does, you'll love *EVE: Valkyrie*. You'll love it enough to overlook its flaws – the relatively shallow gameplay and lack of objective drive to play – because it's what every young wannabe pilot has ever dreamed of: the opportunity to weave through meteors, the chance to cut through colourful vapour lines and engage in frantic battles, shooting everything and anything that moves.

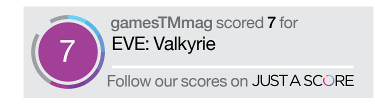
EVE: Valkyrie is one of the most spectacular and content-complete games available on PSVR, proving (just as it did for the launch of *Oculus Rift*) that the new technology can both support full game releases and sustain lengthy play sessions without pulling you into the anticipated throes of motion sickness.

The moment you jettison out from the bowels of a space station – gazing out across the planets, stars and enemy fighters – is still one of the defining moments of VR, as is utilising CCP Newcastle's innovative head-tracking look-to-lock missile system. That said, it's still difficult to ignore how hollow the dog-fighting eventually becomes. Still, if you have a crew to engage in multiplayer with – across both PSVR and Oculus, thanks to cross-platform support – *EVE: Valkyrie* should sustain until the big hitters land in 2017.

Above: While *Eve Valkyrie* provides a lot of fun, the actual ship-to-ship combat can get a little tiresome eventually. The thrill of weaving through space, dodging debris and navigating impossible spaces at high speed can only last for so long.

VERDICT

SPECTACULAR BUT STRUGGLES TO MAINTAIN MOMENTUM





Below: We weren't sold on the enhanced visuals of Area X when it was first shown, but seeing it for yourself is a real game-changer. It's stunning, to the point that we're almost sad that the whole game didn't get a similar makeover.

VR IS THE MIND KILLER

Rez Infinite

PUBLISHER: Enhance Games | **DEVELOPER:** In-house | **ORIGIN:** Japan
PRICE: £19.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

PS VR

It feels like somewhat of a bad omen – or at least some kind of cruel joke – to see a new piece of technology launch with an updated version of a game that first released on the ill-fated Dreamcast – in a starring role no less. However, the dark clouds part the moment you hit the Touchpad button to activate VR Mode and become one with *Rez*. This has always been a game that is best enjoyed bright, loud and isolated – optimal conditions that are easier than ever to achieve once you are strapped into a VR headset. And yes, it's as glorious as ever.

Below: Contrary to some reports prior to launch, the whole of *Rez Infinite* – including Area X – is playable without a VR headset. As a pure score attack game, that's perhaps still the purest way to play.

> Playing Rez has never felt more natural than in VR
> JONATHAN GORDON, GAMES™ EDITOR



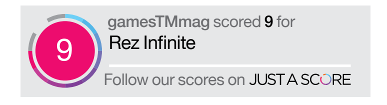
For the main game – presented here in fully remastered form with all the old unlockables and options intact behind the enhanced presentation – VR comes in two flavours, a more sedate option where aiming is still primarily done with the controller and a more intense mode with full head tracking for aiming. The latter is something of a double-edged sword, the closer viewpoint requiring much more looking around in order to catch all enemies, projectiles and pickups in time but the quicker aiming making clearing up larger groups much smoother and simpler than before.

While this increased immersion is undeniably amazing, there are points where game design simply hasn't been updated to fully accommodate the new freedom of vision – the camera sometimes snaps awkwardly to a different direction, which can be jarring, while brief cutscenes like those common in Area 5 and the final encounter with Eden tend to come with camera cuts that can be uncomfortable to watch. Similarly, the transitions between areas – particularly the more vigorous ones – and some of the quicker movement like in the Area 4 boss battle could trigger motion sickness in affected players. All the same, diving headfirst into the supercomputer is stunning despite these minor faults, and that only improves when you launch into the all-new Area X.

Created specifically for *Infinite*, Area X feels like what *Rez* would be like if it launched today. Overhauled visuals are far more complex and particle effects are *everywhere*, with players even granted control over movements speed and direction in order to soar around beautiful new arenas. As with the core game, the sense of escalation is incredible, more complex enemy types and audio stings layering on intensity from all sides as you soar towards your destination. Area X is the clear centrepiece of the VR *Rez* experience, a mode evidently constructed with VR in mind rather than updated to simply support it, and right now, there's a solid argument to be made for this being the quintessential PSVR experience. If we were to pick a classic game to launch alongside Sony's VR gambit, we don't think we'd be able to settle on a better fit than *Rez*.

VERDICT

THE ULTIMATE WAY TO EXPERIENCE SYNAESTHESIA



FUN TO VISIT, BUT YOU WON'T WANT TO STAY

PlayStation VR Worlds

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** London Studio | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £29.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

PS VR

Given that every headset already comes with a demo disc that offers a selection of different experiences to try, *VR Worlds* finds itself in a curious position. A disparate set of tech demos of varying quality, it's a novelty selection box that would work really well as a permanent fixture in a PSVR demo unit (were it not for the fact that *The London Heist* has quite the mouth on it, at least) but that falls incredibly flat as a commercial product.

The main reason for this is a complete lack of longevity in all five titles. *Ocean Descent* is the worst offender in this regard, a barely-interactive diving experience that runs for ten minutes or so, and while cool the first time, you'll never want or need to run it more than once, especially since the two unlockable dives are just dull truncated versions of the main one. There's a little more substance to *VR Luge*, but it's just not very much fun – a lack of collision with vehicles removes all sense of risk and cripples the experience's impact and thrill, plus the sense of speed is never that great to begin with and it's uncomfortable to play.

Things do pick up elsewhere, it must be said, and although we've seen most of it before at various preview events, *The London Heist* is the pick of the bunch. It's short, sure, but it's a great showcase for a level of detail and interactivity that should come as standard in VR-centric games. Played with Move (the preferable control system), you can fiddle with trinkets while the Cockney mobsters reel off their so-bad-it's-good cliché dialogue, or mess with radios and air-cons while chugging a soda and gunning down bikers – it's the playful freedom of something like *Job Simulator* presented as a secondary feature rather than the focus of a game and in something as knowingly daft as this, it works brilliantly. Some of the minor details really make us excited for future titles that heed its advice, too – NPCs comment on and react to all kinds of gestures and head movements, plus there are a good amount of subtle interactions with the world itself.

> A few cool ideas, but it should have been bundled in
>
> JOSH WEST, GAMES™ FEATURES EDITOR

Scavengers Odyssey, meanwhile, feels like a missed opportunity, its brain-bending, stomach-turning gravity-defying leaps a sensation worlds apart from its tedious combat. Given the nature of the game and how it sees you leaping through space and hurtling around at a fair pace, it's best played after the others, once your eyes and brain are more acclimatised to the VR experience – like *RIGS*, it's an intense ride and so probably not the best place to start your VR adventure. *Danger Ball*, despite its name, fits that role far better, a simple 3D version of *Pong* where the paddle is moved simply by looking around.

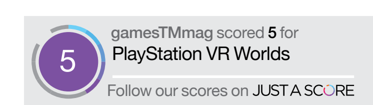


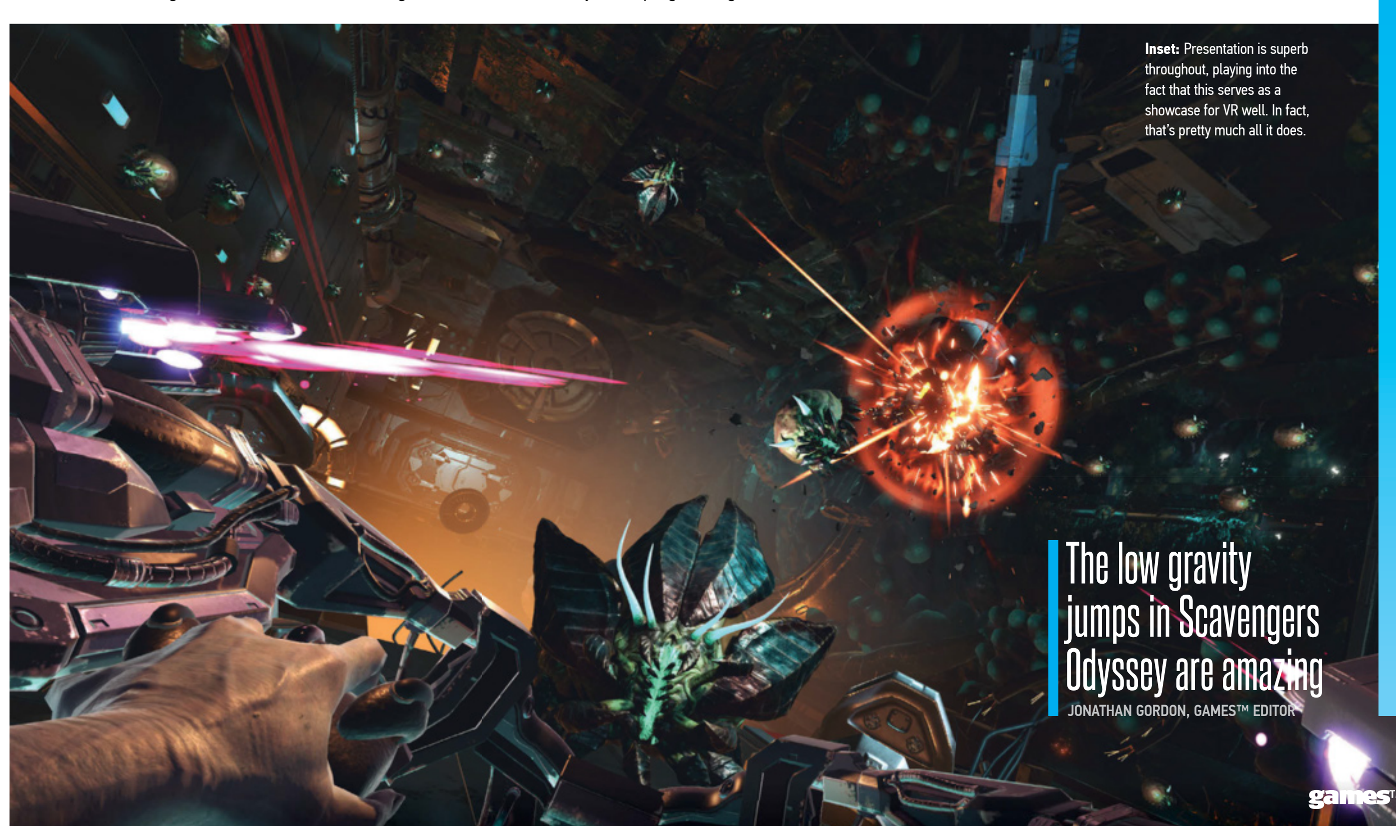
Above: *The London Heist* is the most fleshed-out of the five titles on show, both in terms of content and the level of interaction possible. You'll need a pair of Move controllers to get the most out of the experience.

If you're likely to be showing off your new headset to a bunch of different people, *VR Worlds* is a fair showcase for the new hardware, if one where only *The London Heist* stands out over anything on the stock demo disc. If only one or two people are likely to experience it, though, it's simply not worth the outlay.

VERDICT

AN EXPENSIVE TASTER THAT WILL LEAVE YOU HUNGRY

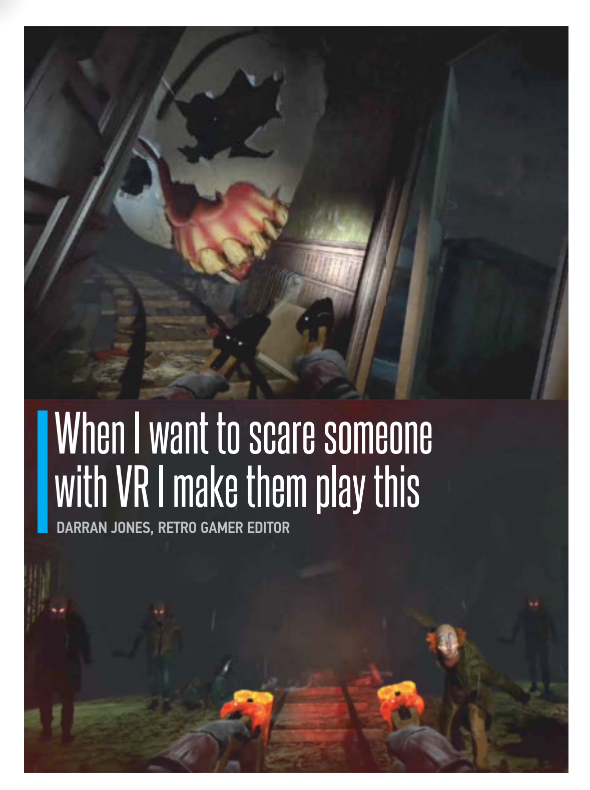




Inset: Presentation is superb throughout, playing into the fact that this serves as a showcase for VR well. In fact, that's pretty much all it does.

> The low gravity jumps in Scavengers Odyssey are amazing
>
> JONATHAN GORDON, GAMES™ EDITOR





When I want to scare someone with VR I make them play this

DARRAN JONES, RETRO GAMER EDITOR

Above: Obstacles must be avoided by leaning or ducking, sometimes while hurtling along at speed. Fortunately, this concept is introduced early and isn't exactly the toughest thing to pick up.

DARE YOU RIDE THE GHOST TRAIN?

Until Dawn: Rush Of Blood

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** Supermassive Games | **ORIGIN:** UK
PRICE: £15.99 | **PLAYERS:** 1 | **ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

PS VR

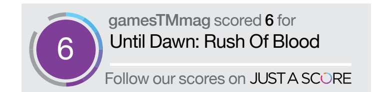
While we're not entirely sure why the *Until Dawn* name has been slapped on this tongue-in-cheek on-rails (literally) shooter, it might have something to do with the PS4 horror surprise's past. Supermassive Games was originally working with Move as a primary input device for *Until Dawn* when the game was first announced for PS3, later moving to traditional controller when it was shifted onto the current gen console instead. That experience is telling here, with individual gun aiming possible with twin Move wands to an extent far greater (and thus far more useful) than is possible on a controller, which basically binds both guns/arms together to track and follow the pad in 3D space.

Each of the seven differently themed levels taps into a different fear, taking in clowns, ghosts, pigs, mannequins and spiders for a few easy frights (if not quite as easy as its many jump scares) and they're mostly good fun on your first play or two. Even with the odd branching route, though, all impact is lost once you know what's coming up, leaving the game to fall back on a passable scoring system to provide longevity. Trouble is, that kind of play doesn't exactly gel with the incredibly slow pace that its horror roots demand, and even though there are multiple difficulty levels, leaderboards, collectibles and secrets to grab, *Rush Of Blood* just isn't a game you can play for long before you start seeing the cables and pulleys that make the ghost train run.

A playful fusion of roller-coaster, light gun game and soft horror game that plays off cheap frights and fears, *Rush Of Blood* is an amusing enough ride but most likely one that you won't want to get on more than a couple of times.



DAFT, SHORT-LIVED FUN



AN ESSENTIAL DOWNLOAD

The Playroom VR

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** In-house | **ORIGIN:** Multi
PRICE: Free | **PLAYERS:** 1 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

PS VR

Just as *The Playroom* served as a decent demonstration of what the DualShock 4 and PlayStation Camera could do in tandem, this VR update – once again populated by those adorable little robots – is a showcase for what can be done when you throw a VR headset into that mix as well. While the original was a solo experience, the VR version is instead primarily multiplayer, offering a selection of rebuttals to the idea that putting on a headset immediately shuts off social play. A quaint little Crash-esque platformer and capsule toy diorama are the only parts that can be played alone, in fact, but it's for the best – other demos out there show off solo experiences just fine, and it's great to see some more inventive group experiences.

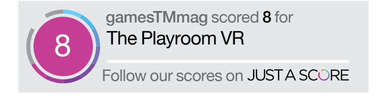
Interestingly, this is one of the few games available that displays something different on the shared screen to what the headset user sees, which is used on a gameplay level (*Wanted!* sees TV players describing villains from the screen that the headset player has to identify and shoot, for instance) as well as reinforcing dialogue between players – different perspectives mean there are surprises to be found in the VR world that you might not discover without help from the TV team. Aside from this, only *Keep Talking* and *Nobody Explodes* really experiments with local multiplayer VR on PS4 right now, meaning this beautifully presented and charming showcase should be an automatic download once you have a headset – considering it's free, the potential and production values are both absolutely superb and it makes us eager to see what developers will cook up next when it comes to social VR.

One of the best showcases for the tech, and it's free!

LUKE ALBIGÉS, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

VERDICT

PROOF THAT VR NEEDN'T BE A SOLITARY EXPERIENCE





Above: Don't confuse the *Playroom* with *Playroom VR* on the PlayStation Store as they are two different titles. And this one is a lot more fun too.

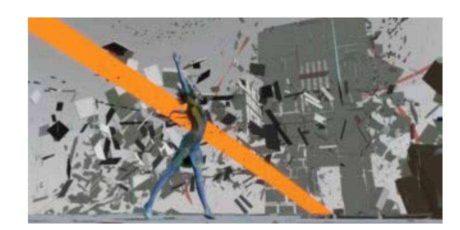


HERE THEY LIE

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** Tangentlemen
PRICE: £15.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

Part *Silent Hill,* part *The Last Of Us* and all deeply, wonderfully horrible, *Here They Lie* is the launch title of choice for those who want to be scared stupid – the *Blair Witch* to *Until Dawn*'s Scream, if you will. Movement is fairly sluggish, which actually helps with the tension – the 45-degree right stick jerk turns of the default control method are nasty, but turning via head tracking (or the right stick with an alternate mode) works okay. Stylish, bleak and terrifying.

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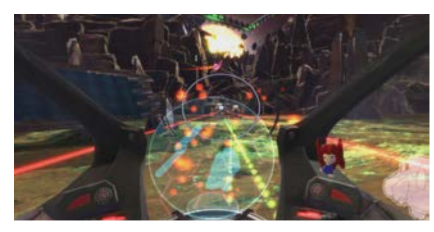


BOUND

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** PLASTIC/SANTA MONICA STUDIO | **PRICE:** £15.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

The generally distant viewpoint of the core game presents a few issues in terms of gameplay and appreciating *Bound*'s incredible animation, and both are improved by pulling in closer and being able to appreciate the studio's artistry. Camera placement and movement are less than ideal but even so, we'd suggest that getting lost in this abstract world while wearing a headset might be the best way to explore it, even if some old gameplay issues are still present.

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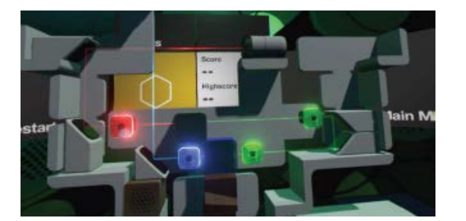


SUPER STARDUST ULTRA VR

PUBLISHER: Sony | **DEVELOPER:** D3T
PRICE: £7.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

Most will have played this great twin-stick shooter in some guise or another, and few will be surprised that the leap to VR doesn't bring much in the way of change. It's cool to glance around the planet as you track targets and the 3D effects are neat, but it's hardly a showcase for the new tech. That said, a new *Battlezone*-like mode does let you take to the ground in a tank, which is decent – if limited – fun.

6



TUMBLE VR

PUBLISHER: SCEE | **DEVELOPER:** Supermassive Games
PRICE: £7.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

This is a thoroughly engrossing puzzle game, although we'll admit the concept of stacking blocks on top of one another hardly seems like it ought to be. Somehow this playschool-level experience finds new levels of tension through a VR headset as you must consider material type, weight and balance to build structures against different criteria. It's Move compatible, but we'd recommend using the DualShock 4, as we found it more manageable.

8

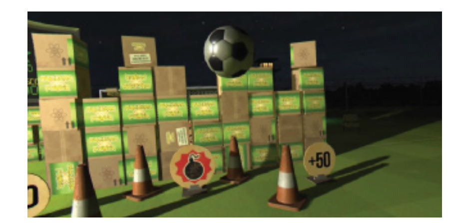


JOB SIMULATOR

PUBLISHER: Owlchemy Labs | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £TBC | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

We really fell in love with *Job Simulator* when we played it using HTC Vive, and while the charm and hilarity remains strong, its implementation through the Move controllers and PSVR headset are not as robust. This seems mainly to be a technical issue as this game really benefits from the full-room VR experience, allowing for more accurate tracking of body and head movement. We found this version to be glitchy and often a little frustrating.

5



HEADMASTER

PUBLISHER: SCEE | **DEVELOPER:** Frame Interactive
PRICE: £TBC | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

***Headmaster* was one** of the most surprising games in the PSVR launch lineup, not least because it's rather good. With its Aperture-esque testing style and hands-free gameplay, *Headmaster* is simple to understand and a real challenge to master. Heading the ball into the goal may seem simple enough, but doing it past drone-propelled cardboard goalkeepers is another matter entirely. You don't need to be a football fan to enjoy this.

7



HUSTLE KINGS VR

PUBLISHER: SIEE | **DEVELOPER:** EPOS GAME STUDIO
PRICE: £15.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** YES

The core *Hustle* *Kings* gameplay is solid and some of the game modes and table designs are a lot of fun to play with, but some design choices for VR get in the way of a fully enjoyable experience. Placing the player so tight to the table, for instance, can make lining up shots awkward. Having to warp around the table for new vantage points doesn't help much either. We couldn't get much use out of Move, but we imagine DualShock control would be advised anyway.

5



LOADING HUMAN: CHAPTER 1

PUBLISHER: MAXIMUM GAMES | **DEVELOPER:** UNTOLD GAMES | **PRICE:** £34.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** YES

In attempting to meld a first-person perspective with gameplay that feels close to a point-and-click adventure, *Loading Human* is at least playing around with the VR formula. Being able to see your body and yourself in the mirror, and interact with objects, can be pretty intense. A shame then that it all looks a little off as your arms feel like they're crossing over into your head. Narratively, it's reaching for a mature, considered story, but isn't there yet.

6



100FT ROBOT GOLF

PUBLISHER: No Goblin | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £15.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

Feeling almost like a spiritual successor to *Ribbit King, 100ft Robot Golf* embraces its daftness in order to cater to the underserved comedy golf crowd. It's about speed rather than finesse, mastering the unique swing mechanics of each mech as quickly as possible, blocking opponents' shots and levelling obstacles in order to be first to the pin. As entertaining as this simple golf game may be, though, VR just makes it all feel even jankier.

6



PlayStation VR

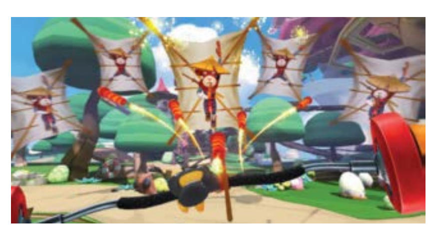


RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

PUBLISHER: Square Enix | **DEVELOPER:** Crystal Dynamics | **PRICE:** £44.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

This anniversary release of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* is pretty excellent, and as a stand-alone game we would score it pretty highly, but taking the *Blood Ties VR* experience on its own, it leaves much to be desired. It's interesting and Croft Manor is brilliantly recreated, but playing it in VR adds little compared to the traditional third-person view. In fact, we found the DLC's free movement mode to be one of the most dizzying VR experiences at launch.

4



ACEBANANA

PUBLISHER: Oasis Games | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £11.49 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

A tech demo for the Move controllers disguised as a VR game, forcing you to draw arrows at monkeys as they attempt to steal your banana stash. Objects regularly get flung at you, which is disorientating, as too is rope-swinging between various stationary shooting locations. *AceBanana* feels like a launch game, detached from any real ambition to showcase the technology but desperate to catch the attention of day-one adopters eager for something to play.

4

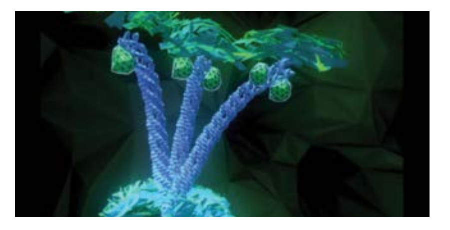


EVE: GUNJACK

PUBLISHER: CCP | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £7.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

With its roots firmly planted in the mobile space, *EVE: Gunjack* is proof that virtual reality often works best when the experience is built around short pick up and play sessions. *Gunjack* is certainly functional – enjoyable, even – although it lacks the exhilaration or excitement to make it a truly definitive experience. Look-to-aim turret shooters are going to be in for a swift revival with the arrival of VR and *Gunjack* sets the benchmark fairly high.

6



HARMONIX MUSIC VR

PUBLISHER: Harmonix | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £11.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

What would possess you to pay for music visualisation software, even one with the loosest interpretation of interaction? Okay, so Harmonix is a fairly solid sell, though it's also deceptive. This has little of the charm that make its games so enticing, nor does it offer much in the way of entrancing solitude. Instead, you may simply feel trapped inside of your tunes – the quickest way to let your mind slip away is to stare into the mesmerising abyss of vibrations turned visual.

5



KEEP TALKING & NOBODY EXPLODES

PUBLISHER: Steel Crate Games | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £11.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

One of the most inventive uses of VR so far, this stressful puzzle game presents a procession of procedurally-generated bombs to defuse, while the rest of the players fight over defusal manuals and shout instructions. Neither team can see what the other does, so communication is key, as is not rushing despite the strict time limit – confusing stipulations mean that jumping the gun and shouting over one another never ends well. A unique and entertaining social VR experience.

9



SPORTS BAR VR

PUBLISHER: Cherry Pop Games | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £14.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

There's this amazing bar… where disembodied PSVR headsets gleefully play skeeball, chattering away, totally unfazed by darts being thrown at their heads. Where you can order beers and smash the bottles with a cue – the bar tenders won't even call the cops. You could play pool – there are tables, but the camera tracking and motion controls are lousy. So why bother? Because, as a place to hangout with friends and cause chaos, it doesn't get much better than *Sports Bar VR*.

5



SUPERHYPERCUBE

PUBLISHER: Polytronic Corporation | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £24.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

The thunderous beats, the warm neon glow splashed across your eyes, the endless waves of haphazard geometry and strangely-shaped gaps to fit them in; all of it merges into one mesmerising experience called *SuperHyperCube*. It lacks complexity, but in turn it offers a comprehensive, challenging and engrossing puzzle game experience that uses the VR space to incredible effect. *SuperHyperCube* is one of those games that will engrain itself in the mind – it's a must play.

9



THE ASSEMBLY

PUBLISHER: nDreams | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £19.99 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** No

***The Assembly* features** one of the most fully-featured spaces committed to a videogame. It's a true achievement. However, while a strong narrative attempts to tie it all together, it's difficult to overlook the fiddly movement systems that force you to choose between boredom (teleports), or motion sickness (traditional momentum). nDreams is onto something, but it's in desperate need of a rethink in terms of its movement systems.

6



WAYWARD SKY

PUBLISHER: Uber Entertainment | **DEVELOPER:** In-house
PRICE: £15.49 | **MOVE SUPPORT:** Yes

VR has applications outside of hyper immersive first-person experiences. Sometimes it can be used to great effect by just letting you exist in a world space, taking in its sights and sounds. *Wayward Sky* shows the potential for VR-centric storytelling, casting you in a god-like perspective, letting you look down upon a gorgeous diorama sprung to life. The puzzles are intuitive and escalate well, although Uber should have taken more risks with its gameplay to truly standout.

7



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FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

POWERED BY FAN ADORATION AND DRIVEN BY VETERAN DEVELOPERS, YOOKA-LAYLEE IS PROVING ITSELF TO BE THE PERFECT MARRIAGE BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND MODERN GAME DEVELOPMENT



Few things in this game have escaped being anthropomorphised in some fashion. Even the cannon has been turned into a character called Blasto who can help you out on your adventure.

THIS IS A GAME BORN OF PASSION. That much is clear after only a few minutes playing Playtonic's revival of classic 3D platforming. If you didn't already know the team was started by former-Rare staffers looking to tap into a *Banjo-Kazooie* sensibility, then you would be able to work it out pretty fast. The scent of the N64 era is all over this game and a love for that period of gaming is evident. But the passion behind *Yooka-Laylee* exists outside the development team as much, if not more, than it does within.

"It's just been amazing, every step of the way," Playtonic's technical art director Mark Stevenson tells us. "As Playtonic when we did the Kickstarter [campaign], it's all just been an overwhelming response."

Yooka-Laylee currently stands as the seventh most funded videogame on Kickstarter, with 73,206 backers pledging an impressive £2,090,104. It was an amazing campaign given that the team had only really needed £175,000 to get things going. Since then, Team17 has stepped in to help with promotion, allowing the Playtonic crew to concentrate on expanding the team, honing the game and keeping followers informed of its progress.

"It's been another interesting challenge," admits Stevenson. "I've been in the industry a long time and I think the way it has changed, there's an absolute need there to be more transparent and communicate with fans in the community. Back in the day we used to build this stuff in secrecy and say 'here it is everybody'. Nobody can do that anymore, it's just not possible. The games industry is so much bigger than it was back then. There are so many more people invested and interested in it.

"Our biggest problem with it is finding the right balance of not spoiling it. A lot of feedback we've had from fans is 'don't do early access, don't show us too much'. They want to see stuff, but they obviously don't want to spoil the whole experience for themselves. I don't know if you saw we released something called the Toybox experience for the backers. I was trying to do a demo that was as spoiler free as possible. So it's a really neutral background that's not from the game. It gives you a flavour of the characters and the moves. We've had loads of really cool feedback from people who have played that, too. That's helped us improve the game."

"IT'S IMPORTANT TO US THAT IT'S ITS OWN THING – THAT IT'S NOT A CLONE OF WHAT WAS IN THE PAST"

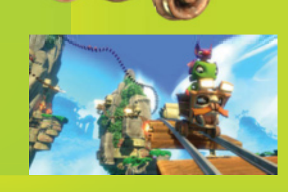
And much as fans have been helpful in telling Playtonic to keep some things under wraps and out of sight so as to save the surprises for later, Stevenson tells us they've also been helpful in giving the team permission to take the time to get things right.

"The response to us saying we need a little bit more time because we want to make it as good as we can was great. People were going 'yeah, please make it the best you can'."

"I'm hugely proud of what we've achieved and the scope of the game that we've done in [18 months]," he adds. "We just need that little bit of extra time to make it shine."

But as we mentioned, the other side of this passionate coin is from people on the team, such as Stevenson, who left Rare in order to pursue this project. "When I started out I would be building characters, building backgrounds and animations, doing promo art," he reflects. "As the teams got bigger and bigger people generally tend to have to specialise more and you either just model characters or you just do animations or you just do backgrounds or just do concept. That wasn't really for me and now I'm back again to doing what I consider my sweet spot of getting my hands dirty in all manner of things. Every day is different and exciting. I love it."

Now he has the chance to get his hands dirty again and try out a little of everything, which seems to be how everyone at Playtonic prefers things. "Everybody in the company has to wear multiple hats basically," he adds. "Andy [Robinson, writer and



There's a little bit of everything in terms of Rare's greatest hits making an appearance in *Yooka-Laylee*, including mine cart sections that remind us of *Donkey Kong Country* and character transformations skin to *Kameo*.



The game world is looking pretty vast and promises many, many hours of gameplay, which was always typical of 3D platformers back in the day and has been lost a little with modern action-adventure titles.

communications director] does a fair bit of that, but everybody mucks in and does whatever they need to do." And that's showing up in the game too. You can tell this is a team that's having fun and enjoying the process. Just as with Banjo and Kazooie, Yooka and Laylee often make jokes and quips at the expense of clichés in the games industry, but where the off-the-cuff remarks of Kazooie in *Nuts & Bolts* sometimes felt a little bitter, Laylee's barbs feel lighter and more mischievous. It might just have been our intepretation or projection onto the game, but it feels as if the joy of making this uncompromised homage to classic 3D platforming is seeping through into the characters and dialogue.

The team itself, made up of about 75 per cent ex-Rare developers and the rest relatively new game-makers, has been growing gradually from its Kickstarter success until now, expanding on key departments and establishing itself as a studio that's ready to stick around once this project is done. As the team has grown, so has the game. With an increased budget thanks to Kickstarter and the support of Team17, Playtonic has become more and more ambitious with what *Yooka-Laylee* can become.

"The funny thing is that it has obviously allowed us to expand on our original plans, to go multiplatform," says Stevenson. "We've grown the company from six people at that point to 20 now in house. It's allowed us to expand a lot quicker. The game is probably going to be a lot bigger than it was originally intended as well. It just allowed everything to happen a lot faster. To make it better."

But this was more or less exactly where the studio founders wanted to be eventually in terms of team size. "We kind of had an idea of 'this is the company size, this is the company split'. Based on past experience really. A lot of us work from very small teams back in the

THE ANNOTATED GUIDE TO YOOKA AND LAYLEE

A BRIEF LOOK AT OUR NEW HEROES' ATTRIBUTES

YOOKA

EDIBLE POWERS

Yooka can eat berries in the game, each of which embues him with special abilties. These include:

SPLASHBERRIES, which allow you to spit streams of water.

FROSTBERRIES, which give you the ability to spit shards of ice.

FLAMEBERRIES, which turn you into a dragon of sorts by spitting fire.

CANONBALL, technically not a berry, but it turns Yooka into metal.

CAMO CLOAK

Allows Yooka to tap into his chameleon heritage, making him transparent for a short period of time, draining the power meter as a result.

GRAPPLING TONGUE

Allows Yooka to grab objects with his tongue and drag himself up to them.

BUBBLE

Known by fans as the fart bubble, this allows Yooka to breathe and walk underwater for a period of time.

LIZARD LEAP

Using his tail curled up underneath himself, Yooka can jump higher with this move.

LAYLEE

GLIDE

Less demanding than flight, Laylee can keep a hold of Yooka and help them each platform a little bit further away.

SONAR 'SPLOSION

Laylee can emit a huge sound wave, that hits enemies at close range, knocking them off their feet.

SONAR SHOT

A short, sharp ring of sound that can be used to activate objects in the game.

FLIGHT

Laylee's bat background offers some fairly clear advantages, such as being able to fly to high vantage points. It drains the power meter, though.

COMBO

REPTILE ROLL – Yooka rolls up into a ball, Laylee leaps on top of him, and the pair can move faster and move up steep surfaces as a result.

BUDDY SLAM – This is a combo move of both characters leaping into the air. Laylee then slams into Yooka, forcing him into the ground hard.

AIR ATTACK – Yooka leaps into the air and Laylee flies around, hitting any enemies that come close.

One of the many modern touches you will notice quickly with this game is the fantastic lighting and textures in the world. It's a far cry from the *Banjo* days.

Super Nintendo days through to massive teams in the Kinect Sports days with products that not only used the whole of that company, but other companies as well. We all had this idea of this being our sweet spot of where we wanted to be in terms of team size."

And of course the game has grown just as the development team has, becoming a larger and more diverse experience with each passing month. As we entered the demo area of *Yooka-Laylee* we were a little overwhelmed by the wealth of content and options available to us in terms of directions we could head in and challenges we could face. Stevenson assured us this was purely for the demo experience, but is reflective of the broader scale the team is after. "You will start in a hub world, which will be a little bit more guided. Initially, for the sake of the demo, we've thrown people in at the deep end. We've unlocked a lot of the moves that wouldn't have by that point. We've unlocked a lot of challenges you won't see at that point."

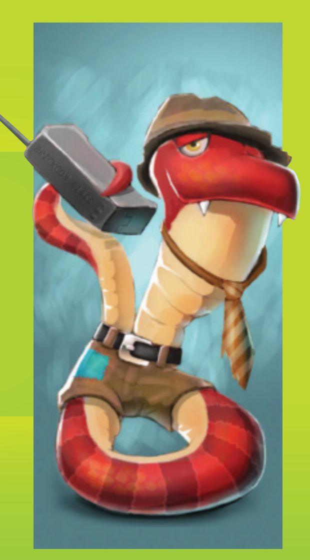
Wandering around we got to see so much of the classic *Banjo-Kazooie* flavour writ large across a new canvas. There's all the youthful energy that these two new characters bring and an interesting balance of new and old being carved out. "I guess it's been an interesting line to walk," Stevenson tells us. "It was kind of sold on that nostalgia of the return to 3D platformers that don't really seem to get made much these days. But it's important to us that it's its own thing, that it's not a clone of what was in the past, that it's current, that it's relevant. In terms of how things have moved on, in terms of technology and game design. It's 15 [or] 16 years since that kind of period of N64 games."

So *Yooka-Laylee* is combining many modern structures and models to enhance and embellish its classically inspired gameplay, while simultaneously throwing in a few visual and situational nods to the past. "We've got a very freeform approach to how you play it in terms of when you go into a level, it's pretty open to wander around, look for stuff to do," Stevenson informs us. "The moves that you can get in a level, you can choose to buy them in any order you like or not at all. The worlds – as well as opening new worlds, it's possible to go back and expand each world once, which adds in new challenges that will make use of later moves and offer harder challenges. You don't have to go to the next level, you can add more onto the previous levels. So as much as possible we've kind of got this open world, player choice, freedom experience. That kind of makes it feel more current. We've got stuff that's clearly nostalgic in terms of the gibberish voices, the little character heads. Even the UI design – we've got purposely enlarged text, purposely chunky graphics, all rendered in that classic style from that period."

"I WANT PEOPLE TO PLAY THE GAME AND HAVE THAT KIND OF FEELING OF THE GAME THAT THEY PLAYED BACK THEN WHEN THEY WERE YOUNGER"

One great example of this is that the conversation boxes are really rather large compared to most modern games. It's a small nod to the days of CRT TVs when large text was necessary for the small screens we were playing on. Similarly, the gibberish language everyone in the game speaks could probably have been replaced with voice acting if Playtonic had wanted to, but it is a nice homage to the days of limited cartridge space when large audio files would have been a drain on resources.

In some ways these self-imposed limitations must also be allowing the Playtonic team to explore other, more resource-demanding ideas in the game. But still, getting that balance right is always a key concern. "It's a 3D platformer from that N64 era, there are certain expectations," Stevenson insists. "The people who played those games can pick it up and get to grips with the basics like it's an old friend. But then there's tonnes of new stuff, in terms of new moves and different moves that obviously are new because of the characters we've chosen. We've purposefully played on the kind of characters they are. Yooka has his tongue which he can grab stuff with. His ability to change colour like a chameleon so he can become invisible. And the tongue means he can eat stuff and change his colour, imbuing you with different attributes. Laylee





THE SHOVEL KNIGHT LEGACY

THE GREAT MASCOT OF RETRO-INSPIRED INDIE GAMES IS AT IT AGAIN

Shovel Knight was a hugely successful action-platformer inspired by the best 2D experiences of the late Eighties and early Nineties. Since its release in 2014, he's been popping up in a bunch of like-minded (and some not-so-obvious) games that also appear to be harking back to a different age. Here's *Shovel Knight*'s latest gameography.

RUNBOW

The 2D platform racing game exclusive on the Wii U includes Shovel Knight as one of a number of guest stars added into the game. More characters from various indie titles, many of which aren't even on Wii U, were announced through 2015.

AZURE STRIKER GUNVOLT 2

Another appearance for the Knight on an exclusive Nintendo title. This appearance came about through the use of a Shovel Knight amiibo and the fact that his creator, Yacht Club Games, assisted in bringing *Azure Striker Gunvolt 2* to the West.

HEX HEROES

A game on the horizon now as Prismatic Games follows up its puzzler, *The Bridge*, with a real-time strategy game for PC and Wii U. Shovel Knight joins the cast of game pieces replacing an in-game class along with a number of other heroes.

ROAD REDEMPTION

This reimagining of *Road Rash* for the modern era is one of the stranger appearances of Shovel Knight, but here he comes on the back of a motorcycle wielding his famous spade. It's another reason to be excited by this game.

INDIVISIBLE

The maker of *Skullgirls* has been putting together an all-star, crossover cast for its action RPG experience. So, expect to see Shovel Knight, of course, but also characters from *Hyper Light Drifter*, *Guacamelee*, *Super Time Force* and *Battle Chasers*.

BLOODSTAINED

Seemingly thanks in part to the relationship between Inti Creates and Yacht Club Games through *Azure Striker Gunvolt 2*, concept art for Shovel Armor in *Bloodstained* has now been confirmed to appear in the game.

YOOKA-LAYLEE

The reason why we put this list together in the first place, the Knight is appearing in this game too, having seen his adventures take him slightly off course. It speaks to the open community of indie developers at the moment that he keeps popping up in things.



on your back has sonar moves. As much as possible we've gone for things that seem relevant to the creatures that they are. Like I said earlier, it's been a fine line. What we definitely don't want to do is make a game that's exactly like it was back then. Because sometimes nostalgia is just that. I want people to play the game and have that kind of feeling of the game that they played back then when they were younger, without having to literally play that game. If they go back and play that game, maybe it doesn't stand up anymore."

We suggested that in some ways we had a little taste of that with the release of the *Rare Replay* collection, chronicling some of the best of Rare's titles over the last 30 years, but even these retro titles had the benefit of new hardware behind them, as Stevenson reminds us. "You see a lot of advantages because of the technology and the steady frame rate and stuff. We were always trying to do so much on the N64 that frame rate was challenging."

Playtonic has tried hard to recapture as much of the magic of N64-era platformers as possible, and that comes with upsides and downsides. It's more expansive than anything this team could have achieved in the Nineties, with nods to carting levels from *Donkey Kong*, the collection of jiggies and so much more. Sometimes it shows up in the controls too, which still feel a little jittery at times. But with a game so packed full of fun mechanics and references, it's really quite something for anyone who grew up on titles like this.

We asked Stevenson, given everything he's been able to get his hands into and work on with this game, what he was most proud of? "Oh, God, I don't know, I hate questions like that," he laughs. "I feel blessed and fortunate that I get to do something like this and get paid for it. Yeah, I don't know. That's a tough question."

So what of his colleagues? Perhaps there's something of theirs that's really blown him away. "I kind of get that all the time. It's not like we have this amazing thing where everything is managed to a minute work schedule. We have broad tasks of 'you go off and do this, you go off and do that'. And people just manage themselves and do stuff for themselves, so you're constantly seeing stuff that you don't know about and are impressed by. It's kind of weird; I work with Steve Mayles who is the character artist that did some of the *Donkey Kong* guys and Banjo and Kazooie. I actually started my job sharing an office with Steve and 20-odd years later I'm back. I loved his character stuff and I still do and I've always aspired to make characters as good as he does. It's the same with all the guys. They're all really talented. I don't know what to say."

Once again, the passion of this team, the love it has for its creation and for the work it is doing, shines through in *Yooka-Laylee*. It might be a throwback to an older era of gaming, but it looks ready to be so much more for players next year.

Yooka's blue hue here is because he's eaten some frostberries. This means he can now spit shards of ice at enemies, but the effects will wear off after a short while.



Stages will continue to reveal themselves to you as new abilities open up areas. This means lots of going back and forth between worlds in order to see everything this game has to offer.



WHAT?





POKÉMON IS EVOLVING!?

Sun and **Moon** represent the greatest change to the core Pokémon formula since the series began. games™ speaks to director Shigeru Ohmori and producer Junichi Masuda to find out more about this latest evolution of one of gaming's biggest franchises

One of the chief complaints levelled at the *Pokémon* series by those who have burned out on the games is that the core mechanics and structure have changed little in 20 years. Ever since Red first left Pallet Town, the objective has been the same – raise a team of creatures with which to defeat eight increasingly tough Gym Leaders, followed by the region's Elite Four and Pokémon League champion. It's a formula that clearly works and one that has been cemented as how things are done in the world of *Pokémon* by close to 1,000 episodes of the anime series, but that does nothing to change the fact that the thrill of taking down the Elite Four simply isn't what it once was. *Pokémon*'s main campaigns have become a means to an end, a functional introduction to a world, and voyage through it, before the endgame can begin. The structure had grown formulaic, and so with a new director taking the reins on *Sun* and *Moon*, the basic formula was among the first things to be changed.

"This is my first time directing a new game in the *Pokémon* series, so I really wanted to make a really fun, new-feeling game," explains Shigeru Ohmori, who has been involved in planning and design on the series since the third generation of games. He took the directorial role for the first time for *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* – the remakes of the games on which his *Pokémon* adventure began. "We went in and tweaked various little bits – the thought process was to rethink



everything *Pokémon* was about and if we could change areas of the game, we would try to. We tried various different things and settled on a few, like changing the Gyms, for example. This is a new approach for *Pokémon* and by doing this, we're able to get a really fresh feel for both new players and those that have been playing for a long time."

The new Island Trials – the replacement for the traditional Gym system – look to take full advantage of their newfound freedom by offering different experiences that aren't simply boxes full of Trainers with the same types of Pokémon. While the battles against Trial Captains and Kahunas with their themed Pokémon teams will feel similar to battling Gym leaders in previous games, the task of actually reaching them is much more creative than the basic puzzles and mazes veterans will be used to seeing.

Trials themselves take the form of actual quests, more like in a traditional RPG, their varied nature presenting hurdles you wouldn't expect to see in a mainline *Pokémon* game. At their simplest, some might be glorified Gyms but that's fine – the old system has worked for 20 years and still does today, only it's backed up here with an extra degree of variety to keep Trainers guessing. With the methods of progressing across the various islands changing, it stands to reason that the ultimate goal will also be switched up, though this is one of many cards the team is keeping close to its collective chest at this point. Rumours suggest that the goal could be to actually put together this region's equivalent of the Elite Four yourself, although with little to back that up (beyond the fact that it was mentioned among several other 'leaks' that have gone on to be true), we'll have to wait and see.

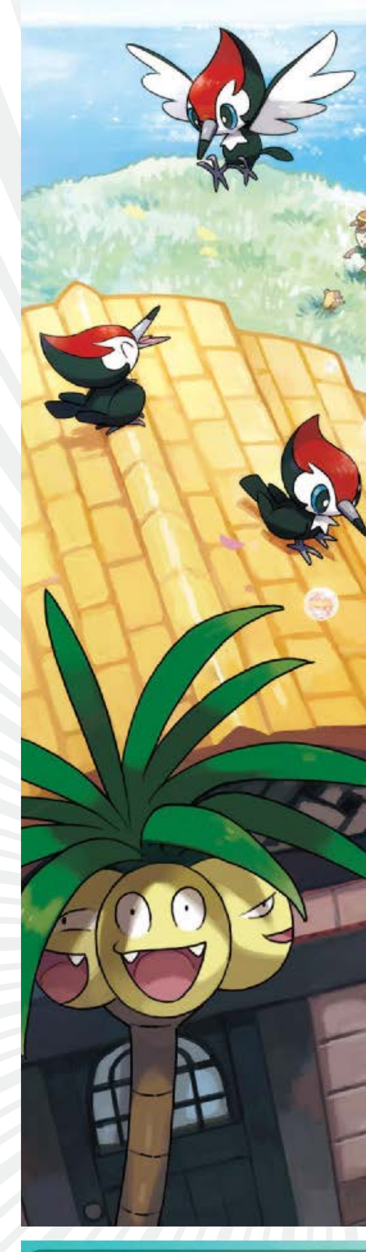
It's important to make the distinction that when we talk about unprecedented change to core mechanics, we refer purely to the mainline games – spin-off titles have long pushed the franchise in all kinds of directions, plus the most successful and divergent of these is barely six months old. "I was actually involved in the development of *Pokémon Go* as well," returning producer and series veteran Junichi Masuda reminds us in discussing the positioning of and crossover between the two titles. "One thing that *Go* really focuses on is the catching aspect – going outside and having fun catching Pokémon. With *Sun* and *Moon*, the heart of the game is raising your Pokémon and battling Trainers and other players around you. We very deliberately try to have our games push in different directions, focusing on different things. We hope that players who enjoyed catching and learning about Pokémon through *Go* can now come into *Sun* and *Moon* and enjoy a deeper experience."

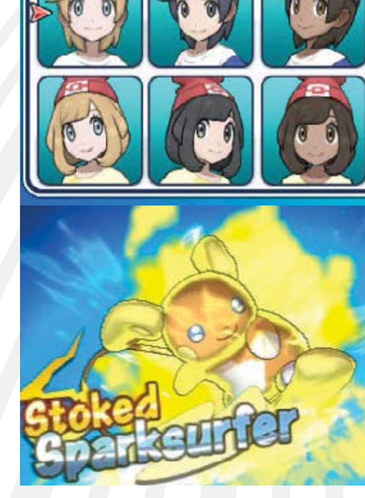
"THE THOUGHT PROCESS WAS TO RETHINK EVERYTHING POKÉMON WAS ABOUT AND IF WE COULD CHANGE AREAS OF THE GAME, WE WOULD TRY TO"

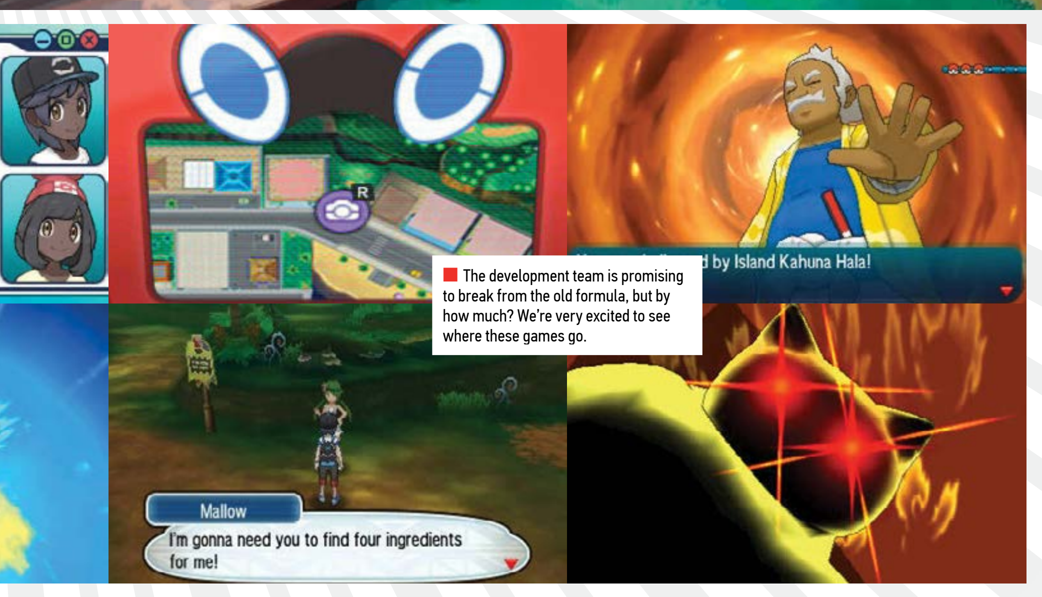
Sun and *Moon* are arriving at the perfect time to capitalise on *Go*'s success – the mobile game may have lost a huge chunk of its player base to bugs, boredom and brevity (relatively, at least – many enthusiasts finished their Pokédexes months ago) but it gave the brand a second wind of publicity the likes of which hadn't been seen since Pokémania first swept the world at the tail end of the last millennium. Many players will want something with more depth and complexity than *Go*, which is where *Sun* and *Moon* come in, and with those aforementioned major changes to the core formula there's little concern over returning players finding the latest game too similar to the ones they enjoyed growing up.

"We've got this change in the style and play of the game, but one thing we're aware of is that previously, you've been able to keep excitement just by saying one or two things about the game and people remained excited," Masuda tells us when we ask about the near-constant drip-feed of new information that has followed since the game's announcement. "Nowadays, you can say some things and people can lose interest quite quickly – it becomes yesterday's news and something else is exciting. We want to try and keep people interested with this slow, continual release of new information and hopefully people will still be looking forward to the game by the time it comes out." While this eats into the mystery and excitement of discovering Pokémon and their evolutions for yourself, it matters less here than such a constant barrage of updates might have hurt previous, more templated releases The look and feel of the world, as well as its presentation, all feel different here, meaning there's still plenty to discover whether you've been keeping up with the barrage of info-bursts or not.

It's tough to see how you even *could* be oblivious to these updates without trying extremely hard, mind. Between official reveals, leaks and rumours, rarely a day has gone by when *Sun* and *Moon* haven't been talk of the town on forums, front-page news for gaming sites, or both. So while new variants of more recent Pokémon were never able to create much buzz outside of enthusiast circles, applying the same logic to creatures from the original 151, fresh from their time in the spotlight in *Go*, has been a masterstroke on GameFreak's part. Some have been almost unanimously well-received, such as Vuplix and Ninetails' new arctic fox look (replete with retooled stats, typing and Abilities) while others have been way more divisive, although you can't expect to adapt overnight to reworked versions of designs we've been seeing for the last two decades. These new Alolan Forms also serve to plug a lot of gaps that updates and sequels have highlighted in the original Pokédex – *Go* players will likely know the frustration of having only a single evolution line available for less-represented types such as Dragon, Ghost and







The development team is promising to break from the old formula, but by how much? We're very excited to see where these games go.

LORE GALORE

But is Pokémon really as interconnected as it seems?

Fan theories have been suggesting a much deeper and more storied world than the *Pokémon* games actually present for years, with the last few iterations offering even more fuel for theories that talk of Pokémon wars, ancient civilisations and extinction events. Ohmori is quick to point out that people have taken speculation several steps too far in a lot of cases, however. "When creating the story, there are lots of different things that inspire us, but no one thing that points us in a certain direction – no underlying message in that regard," he states when we start chatting about links between Project AZOTH, Alola's alchemical themes and any possible correlation between recent releases on a thematic level. "But what we *do* have is players discussing these things and really thinking deeply about the story, which is really interesting from our side and we do want to encourage players to think about what *Pokémon* is all about."



LATEST DISCOVERIES

More new Pokémon spotted in Alola



Silvally

NORMAL

Speculation on the similarities between the previously revealed Type: Null and Arceus – effectively the god of the *Pokémon* universe – turned out to be justified. This evolved form looks to be a synthetic take on Arceus, its ability a clear reference to it (read the letters aloud…) with the same effect of changing type based on unique equipped items. Don't expect it to share Arceus' insanely high base stats, however…

ABILITY

RKS System



Steenee / Tsareena

GRASS

This fruity evolution line comes from Bounsweet, the weird little purple fruit thing that you probably already forgot about. It gets super-fancy when it evolves, culminating in another new Ability at its flouncy final stage in Queenly Majesty, which completely shuts down priority moves. As much as we're not yet sold on the design, that significant Ability could turn out to be a real game-changer.

ABILITY

Leaf Guard/Oblivious/Queenly Majesty



Hakamo-o/Kommo-o

DRAGON **FIGHTING**

The cute little Dragon type that was among the earlier reveals finally gets a full evolution line, not to mention an interesting original typing and a pair of solid Abilities to choose from. Soundproof shuts down audio-based moves while Bulletproof nullifies projectiles, and not knowing which the hard-hitting Dragon will be packing makes using either against it risky. One of our favourite original Alolan designs so far.

ABILITY

Soundproof/Bulletproof



Ribombee

BUG **FAIRY**

An adorable evolution is what you'd expect from a Pokémon called Cutiefly, and it's exactly what you get. It feels like this is as far as the Cutiefly line goes – all evolutions revealed so far have been shown off to their final form – so its usability is questionable, but a not-terrible defensive typing might allow it to see some play, even if it most likely won't dent the competitive scene. Then again, we said that about Klefki too…

ABILITY

Honey Gather/Shield Dust

New islands and themed areas, on top of new battle experiences and events, make this new *Pokémon* one of the most interesting in years.



Steel (and not even a single Dark type), with new variants ensuring these parts of the 'dex have legitimate options for team slots whether you're playing competitively or casually. It might come across as first-gen pandering but given that it serves a genuinely useful purpose, it's hard for anyone aside from the biggest fans of Rattata's design (hey, they might exist…) to stay mad for long, especially when the original versions of Pokémon with Alolan Forms will still be available via trading.

Such communication continues to be central to the *Pokémon* experience and as Masuda tells us, that's the reason the series continues to grow on handhelds. "As you say, it's all about communication and handhelds have long been the best way to get that connected aspect," he confirms. "Moving into the future, Nintendo hardware will continue to change with the times. Wi-fi is everywhere now and with that in mind, maybe the ways in which you communicate with other players will change. We always want to carry on making our *Pokémon* games for the most appropriate hardware based on what we have in mind for each game – we want to bring out the best in the hardware that we put our games on." With Nintendo still to show its hand with regard to its next console when we spoke to him, there was obviously not a lot Masuda was at liberty to disclose there. "We're really excited to see where Nintendo goes with its hardware in the future and we want to continue making games for that," is his diplomatic response when we so much as vaguely approach the subject, although the many rumours that suggest NX will be some kind of portable/console hybrid would see it as a perfect home for a new mainline *Pokémon* game. That the franchise will end up on the platform in some capacity seems to be an inevitability, although there's a fair chance the main series could be rehoused if the format is anything like what various sources have been suggesting.

> "WE'RE REALLY EXCITED TO SEE WHERE NINTENDO GOES WITH ITS HARDWARE IN THE FUTURE AND WE WANT TO CONTINUE MAKING GAMES FOR THAT"

Whatever happens, though, it seems unlikely that the split-release format will ever change, given how fond Masuda seems to be of the approach and how the team still manages to find interesting new hooks for the mechanic in spite of it being something of an anachronism in this more connected modern age, at least in regards to its original purpose. "With this game, we have two different times for the two versions – in *Moon*, it'll be nighttime while it's daytime in *Sun* as it's set 12 hours later," he states, highlighting a unique benefit to this traditional release model. "This different way of experiencing the game is something we think is really interesting and gives value to having two different versions. Another thing is that like in *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire*, there are always slight differences in the storyline depending on which version you're playing. And of course there are the different Pokémon that appear in each version, so for example the Alolan form of Vulpix only appears in *Pokémon Moon*. We really think this is something we can only achieve giving players this interesting, slightly different experience by releasing two separate versions."

While that's one of the few aspects of the series that still sticks staunchly to what its forebears laid out, it's hard to complain when other quality-of-life improvements are coming thick and fast. Hidden variables such as IVs and EVs (Individual Values, the base potential of a Pokémon and Effort Values, training experience invested into each stat whether knowingly or otherwise) have been growing increasingly visible with each release, and the barrier to competitive play gets lowered yet another rung with *Sun* and *Moon* via Hyper Training. Super Training previously allowed Trainers to control EVs and invest them as they saw fit without having to manipulate wild encounters while juggling held items and beneficial diseases (yes, really), and this new system applies



a similar logic to IVs – stats which have until now required either insane luck or meticulous breeding to max out.

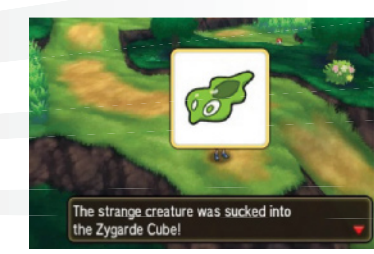
"To carry out Hyper Training, you need to collect silver and gold crowns and these are very rare items, so it's not like you can get your hands on them easily," Ohmori tells us when we air concerns that this easy option could make those who prefer to shoot for perfect Pokémon the old-fashioned way feel like their hard work was being undermined. "It's not that the idea of hatching, breeding, raising, evolving and training your Pokémon is completely gone – you still very much have that in the game. It's still a worthwhile pursuit and we hope that people who enjoy that aspect can continue to do so. What we can give players the chance to do with this new Hyper Training feature is if they've got their favourite Pokémon from previous games, they can bring them over and give them a chance to shine in this new game. There are various ways Trainers can enjoy the depth of the battle system and we hope they'll keep doing that."

Between the massive changes to the core systems of the game and the constant teases and reveals of new content, it feels as though there's more of a buzz around *Sun* and *Moon* than any other *Pokémon* sequel has enjoyed. *Go*'s popularity has likely had a hand in this, but it's those players who have been crying out for change for years that should be most excited. Veteran Trainers finally feel like they can look forward to a new take on the familiar that *Sun* and *Moon* are promising to offer – and do, based on our hands-on time with the games. It doesn't hurt that *Pokémon* as a brand has developed to the point where its multimedia wings spread broader than ever, and things like the *Generations* YouTube shorts and constantly evolving TCG have been instrumental in supporting the franchise's imminent resurgence.

"We do have various staff involved in different things and we always think about these when developing a game," confirms Masuda. "We really want to think about how we can develop beyond the game and widen things once it's finished. For the card game in particular, we've got Creatures Inc. working on the game itself and we discuss with them how best we can expand on the game there and how the new Pokémon we're creating might fit in with their plans. What we're really trying to do is make sure we're creating the most excitement and hype we can around *Pokémon* in all these different fields."

And you know what? It's working. It's *definitely* working.

■ Game Freak's commitment to releasing *Pokémon* games on handheld devices is in part because it wants players to be connected and mobile machines remain the best way to ensure that.







■ As the evolutionary paths of the new starters have emerged we continue to be pleased with the selection. They're going to be very interesting to use.

CAN FINAL FANTASY XV



FINAL FANTASY HAS spent almost thirty years struggling to define itself. It's celebrated, of that there is no question, but it's a franchise that has had a habit of succeeding in spite of its past successes – and perhaps even itself.

That's partly because it has a legacy constructed from forever-shifting components – its characters and themes, its visual identifiers and even its core competencies – each of them warping uncomfortably to fit the framework of a new instalment. Has Square Enix been afraid to let Final Fantasy settle or has it been eager to disassociate its tent-pole franchise from claims of complacency? That's a matter of perspective. But in an era of ever-expanding game budgets, Square Enix's experimental exuberance – its drive to reinvent Final Fantasy from game to game, driven by the advancing technology available at the time – looks to be more of a gamble than a sure thing.

In many respects, this is why every new numbered game bearing the Final Fantasy branding arrives haunted, be it by the ghosts of its predecessors or by the immeasurable weight of expectation. Though perhaps no game in the series has felt the impact of this quite as acutely as Final Fantasy XV. It has become a project that will be forever defined and remembered by its pantomimic development cycle. Square Enix needs a critical and commercial success after the somewhat disastrous Final Fantasy XIII trilogy, while for fans – many of whom have been waiting ten years to finally play this game – expectations have never been higher. Can Final Fantasy XV be the success the fans and studio want (and need) it to be?

"From the customers' perspective this has been a roughly ten-year wait. Production-wise the clock was reset and the team was restructured when the project moved from being Final Fantasy Versus XIII to Final Fantasy XV [in 2012]," says Takeshi Nozue, director



EVER MEET EXPECTATIONS?

AN AUDIENCE WITH GAME DIRECTOR **HAJIME TABATA**

"We can't really manage expectations, all we can do is try to meet them," says Hajime Tabata of Square Enix's most technically ambitious project to date. "[The] extended development is hard on us from a physical and psychologically perspective, as well as a business one, there's no denying that.

"Though it's not on my shoulders alone," continues Tabata, laughing as he says it, speaking in a tone that swings noticeably between excitement and exhaustion. "Everyone on my team, the top management at Square Enix and myself, we all really do have that feeling that we're responsible for making Final Fantasy a truly global IP again and developing something that will make the franchise bigger and stronger than it has been. That feeling is strong across the whole development team and we want to make FFXV a new benchmark for the RPG genre and for games in general."

For those of us, eager to see Final Fantasy reclaim its position as the defining RPG experience of any given console generation, it's been a decade of waiting. We have been

of Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children and Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV. "Establishing Final Fantasy as a top name in modern RPGs was one of our core focuses when the project transitioned from Versus XIII, and our teams have poured their hearts into making this title all it can be… I have no regrets in terms of content, I only regret we weren't able to deliver all this sooner."

> "My original estimates were miscalculated and it has meant we need this delay, that's my honest opinion"

Regret seems to be a feeling shared commonly between the architects of Final Fantasy XV. There's now a dangerous balancing act in play, between over-stretched development and spiralling fan expectation – that's a toxic concoction in this era of ballooning game budgets and instant, hostile player communication. The pressure to deliver has become a weight on the shoulders of everybody involved with this project – the 300 staff based out of the Square Enix Business Division 2 offices – and Final Fantasy XV's director is only too aware that managing anticipation is now, essentially, out of his hands.

By the time it eventually releases in November, *Final Fantasy XV* will have been in active development for a decade. Spending six years as spin-off *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* before work shifted to it being the next major instalment of the franchise.

Square Enix made the decision to delay *Final Fantasy XV* as it didn't want to unleash a huge day one patch on its users, with the studio aware that not every gamer has access to the internet.

"If we put this game out in an unsatisfactory manner then that would have a big negative effect on the future of Final Fantasy"

forced to watch from a distance as the studio changed direction, engineering seismic shifts to both gameplay and scenario type; forced to watch helplessly as the health of the RPG market dwindled, transitioning from a bastion of technical innovation to the subject of niche interest before our eyes. Final Fantasy XV isn't just long overdue for release, it has the potential survival of an entire genre resting on its shoulders.

Perhaps the pressure is on because Final Fantasy used to be brand synonymous with excellence and innovation, setting a benchmark that the entire industry could look towards for inspiration. Now, it is synonymous with delays and disappointment; the protracted development of XV and the dwindling sales of the trilogy Lightning presided over have confirmed as much. Tabata arrived on the Final Fantasy XV project in 2012, tasked with taking Kingdom Hearts director Tetsuya Nomura's vision of "a fantasy based in reality" and actually getting it out of the door and into our hands.



It should, in fact, be in them right now – Final Fantasy XV was originally scheduled to release on 30 September, a release date set with some showboating earlier in the year. In an attempt to meet spiralling expectations however, Tabata had to do something we're all pretty familiar with by now: he had to delay the game. Again. "In order to meet those expectations we've had to put the game back by two months. We're sorry that we had to do that but we don't want to disappoint people when the game is released.

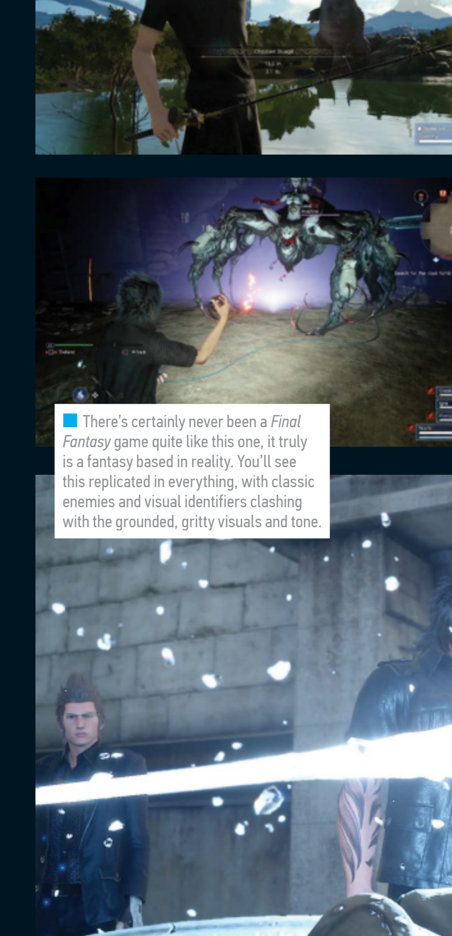
"People have been waiting a long time, from when it was Final Fantasy Versus XIII," Tabata admits readily, with a sadness in his voice and earnest approach to his words. He's just as disappointed that this game has been a decade in the making, though he is eager to ensure that it will be worth the wait. "The way I see it is that the game belongs to the people that pay money to buy it, so from their perspective I think this delay is the right decision. Making that decision was hard and it has created a lot of problems for a lot of people, and I'm sorry for that, but it was the decision we had to make and I think people understand that... If we put the game out in an unsatisfactory manner then that would have a big negative effect on the future of Final Fantasy"

Final Fantasy XV is now content complete, with Tabata leading the charge on final optimisation and bug sweeps ahead of its release on 29 November 2016. But optimisation can often be defined by the trade-offs that ensue, with features being left on the editing floor in an effort to ensure the experience is as smooth as physically possible. For Tabata, obtaining visual perfection without impeding usability has been something of a struggle; with any project ten years in the making, something has to give in the run up to release, right?

"That's a very difficult question to answer and a difficult thing to get right. Whichever path you choose you're taking a bit of a gamble. This is a game in which we can't just abandon the visuals and concentrate only on the gameplay. We can't make that kind of easy decision here," says Tabata. "We are proceeding with the same balance that we wanted to achieve when we first started development. The thing that my original estimates really didn't appreciate completely was the sheer volume of content that was going to make it into the game, though.

"If this was a smaller game then it would have been very easy to sort out every issue relating to both the visuals and gameplay, but the amount of content here means that it's not so easy for us. My original estimates were miscalculated and it has meant we need this delay, that's my honest opinion."

XV will be the first truly open-world mainline Final Fantasy game, and Tabata has his work cut out for him. This is a project unlike any other the studio has attempted before, especially when working with



There's certainly never been a *Final Fantasy* game quite like this one, it truly is a fantasy based in reality. You'll see this replicated in everything, with classic enemies and visual identifiers clashing with the grounded, gritty visuals and tone.



The new action-focused combat system will be divisive, of that there is little doubt. It's a blend of the gameplay you've witnessed in the handheld titles and *Kingdom Hearts*, though it's certainly faster than either of those examples.

an entirely new proprietary game engine. The visuals and gameplay systems need to work in perfect harmony to provide a huge scale to the playable space and the story, without compromising on the precise details that have always made Final Fantasy worlds so fascinating.

Though Tabata will be the first to admit that striking such a balance is "maybe impossible," the director continues on to re-establish his commitment to the project. "Giving players this level of freedom and also having a system that can handle every single eventuality to come from that freedom is something that's not feasible for anyone. [Though] I really do have that desire to get the game to the point where most players can play all the way through to the end without worrying about, or seeing, any technical issues crop up. Certainly, on the main story route we have to provide a flawless experience to the best of our ability."

The struggle that the studio has encountered seems to swell from the central premise itself, the "fantasy based in reality." It has demanded a higher level of graphical fidelity than the studio is familiar with providing; of detail and precision in everything from the character designs to the world layout. Say what you will about Final Fantasy XV, but there's no questioning its ambition. It's strange to see franchise staples such as the Chocobos, crystals, mages and summons clashing together with huge, sprawling cities and towns that don't look all that removed from our own. Whether that's enough to justify the wait, however, will be for us all to decide in the coming months.

"Aiming for a higher level of visual realism does make the development harder, yes. If you're aiming for a lower realism level then there are lots of tricks you can use to get yourself out of design situations as you can use a lot of stylisation to get out of a problem," confirms Tabata, speaking to how much trouble the open world has cast over development. "On the other hand, though, I knew I wanted to create a game that had a lot of value on the visual side and I didn't want to avoid the challenge of achieving that. »



HOW DOES KINGSGLAIVE: FINAL FANTASY XV TIE IN TO THE WIDER UNIVERSE?

TAKESHI NOZUE TALKS ON EXPANDING THE STATE OF PLAY

What was behind the decision to turn the release of *Final Fantasy XV* into a huge multimedia event, with a story spanning videogame, film and anime formats?
Many of our fans have waited a long time for this game, and so we wanted to make sure we gave them plenty to experience and take in, and we also wanted to make something accessible to those who might not yet have a current generation gaming console.

Were the events of *Kingsglaive* ever part of the main *FFXV* game? Or was its story conceived as a companion piece from the start?
As the game transitioned from *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* to *Final Fantasy XV*, it took on an open-world format. One of our core themes was that of the bond of father and son, and we wanted to tell the stories of both. Rather than relegate the tale of the father to back story, we decided to tell it in film format, so the audience could see just what was going on away from the action in-game.

How does *Kingsglaive* tie into the wider *FFXV* story? Is it integral viewing before playing the game?
The stories of both the game and film can stand on their own, but experiencing both will deepen viewers' understanding of underlying links. This extends to the *Brotherhood* anime as well. No one piece is dependent on the others, and each provides an entryway into the greater universe of *Final Fantasy XV*, so fans are free to decide where they'd like to being.

The world of *FFXV* is fantasy heavily rooted in reality; how have you found designing a story and scenarios around characters and items that we might see in our own world?
The *Final Fantasy XV* universe as a whole is about pulling the audience in with the familiar and bringing them into the fantasy world. Adding familiar real-world elements helps to further immerse the audience in the world.

***Final Fantasy* was once regarded as the pinnacle of the RPG genre, but now there's a sense that the franchise is fighting back to reclaim its crown. How important is *FFXV* to Square Enix and what makes it – and the entire wider multimedia experience – so different from what we've seen from the series before?**
Speaking for the teams involved in the *Final Fantasy XV Universe* projects, establishing *Final Fantasy* as a top name in modern RPGs was one of our core focuses when the project transitioned from *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, and our teams have poured their hearts into making this title all it can be. Keeping the franchise accessible even as consoles evolve and some of our longtime fans grow older has also been a priority, which is where *Kingsglaive* (the film), and *Brotherhood* (the anime), come in.

Can we expect to see more *Final Fantasy* films from you in the future? *Kingsglaive* seems to have been received well by fans!
There's nothing currently in the works, but I would love to do something like this again if given the chance.

It's difficult to see how Square Enix will possibly recoup its costs on this project. Forgetting the protracted development cycle, there's also an anime and feature-length film to consider, each flush with Hollywood's finest as voice actors.

Through that approach we've achieved something that really does make FFXV special."

In spending so much time lost in the world of Final Fantasy XIII, constantly re-using the same art assets, cast of characters and laboured plot points, Square Enix slipped from pushing the boundaries of current technology to simply following the curve, something that the studio wasn't about to repeat as Final Fantasy joined the current generation three years into its cycle. XV will see a franchise reborn, developed by a company eager to show that it can still create games that will not only stand the test of time, but cause other developers to stop and take notice. That has been, after all, the driving force behind every one of Square Enix's numerous successes with Final Fantasy since the series' debut almost 30 years ago.

"As a team we feel that we have to push the available technology even further whenever we make a game. Because we make games on computers, and because the capacity of those computers is improving all of the time, if we don't keep aiming to create something that wasn't previously possible it becomes very difficult to create exciting new things for players. That's how we harness technology to help drive what we do.

> "THE THING THAT MY ORIGINAL ESTIMATES REALLY DIDN'T APPRECIATE COMPLETELY WAS THE SHEER VOLUME OF CONTENT THAT WAS GOING TO MAKE IT INTO THE GAME"

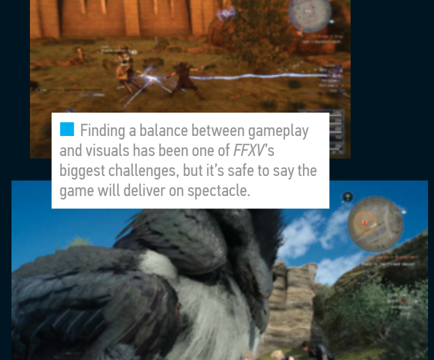
"I really did want to make the best game I could in regards to the specifications and possibilities of the platforms the game is being released on… you have to think about development in terms of the hardware you've got available," continues Tabata. "I changed my approach when I started FFXV, though. Rather than base it around the limitations of existing hardware I thought about how I could create something that is superior to the current level of technology is considered capable of. If I started thinking about things in that very powerful way then that would improve our chances of exploring new possibilities about what we might be able to achieve and how we might take game creation forwards. It's not just about the art and what people can create in that area, it's about how that merges with technology to create new things and that's going to be our approach moving forward."

Final Fantasy XV is just a few weeks from release and it will soon have the weight of the world placed upon its shoulders. Fan appetite has never been stronger, and the game certainly has a lot to prove – even after impressing at every opportunity we've had to get our hands on it. Tabata, on the other hand, just sounds relieved to be approaching the finishing line, with thought of what comes next a little too much to bear.

"What I do think about, though, is how FFXV is going to affect the future of Final Fantasy and how the games are designed from now," says Tabata, noting that the development of this game has changed the way Square Enix approaches game creation across the board. "It's very difficult for me to say whether I'm now a better creator or not because of it.

"If something about me has changed it's that I don't base my development around only a Japanese audience," Tabata insists. "Instead, I now think more globally and try to aim at people all over the world. That really gets you thinking about what people want and how they enjoy games. That changes the whole creative process. Everyone on my team looks at things differently now. Rather than basing our ideas on the current hardware generation or tastes in Japan, we're always looking beyond that and working out what the very best thing we can do is," he says. And what next? There are still some significant hurdles to overcome, but Tabata can be forgiven for beginning to look ahead towards his next order of business: a well earned rest. "To do another game of this size and scale immediately would be hard for me," he says laughing, "I'll probably need a break first."

Lord knows he's earned it.



Finding a balance between gameplay and visuals has been one of *FFXV*'s biggest challenges, but it's safe to say the game will deliver on spectacle.

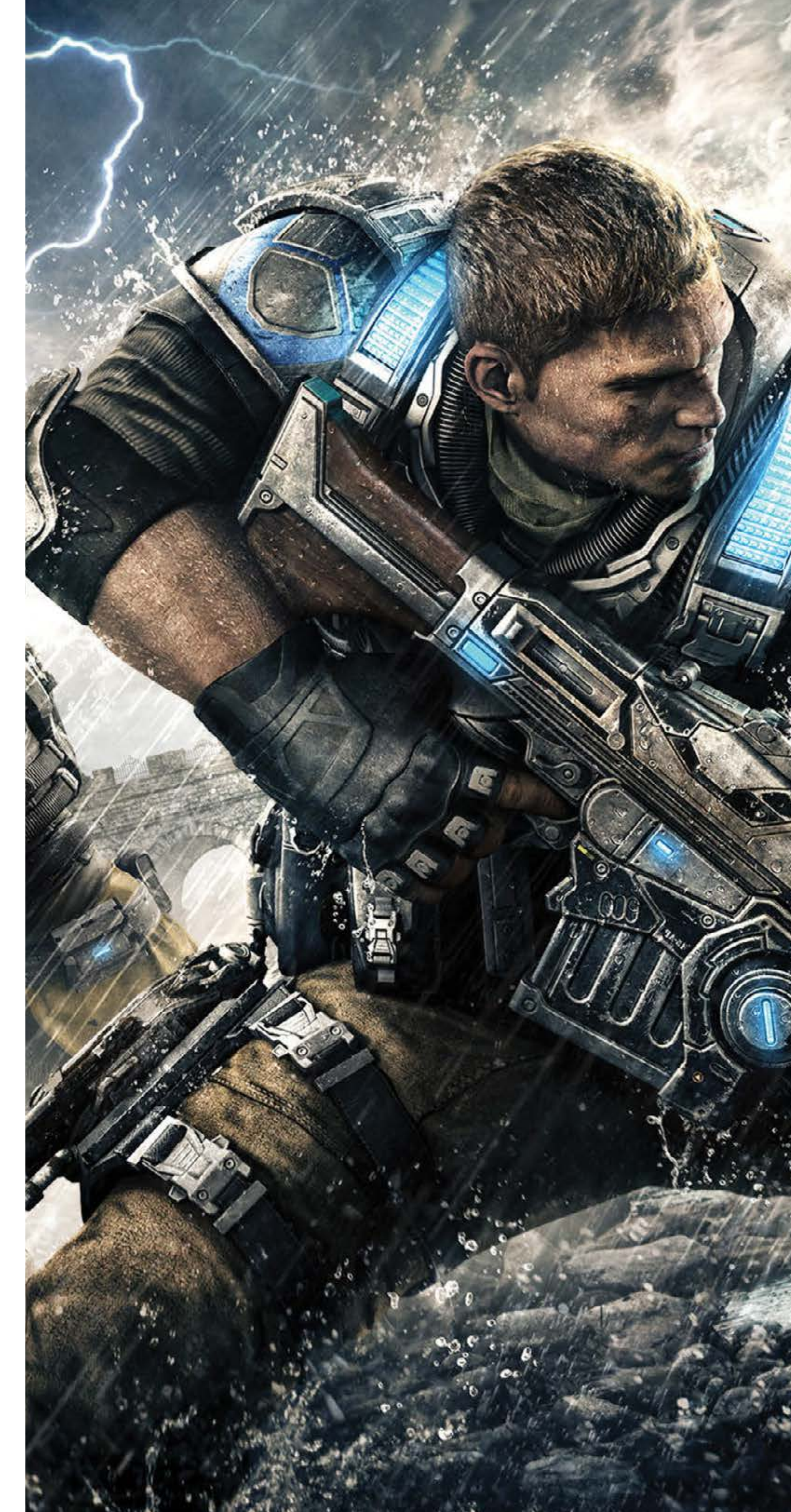


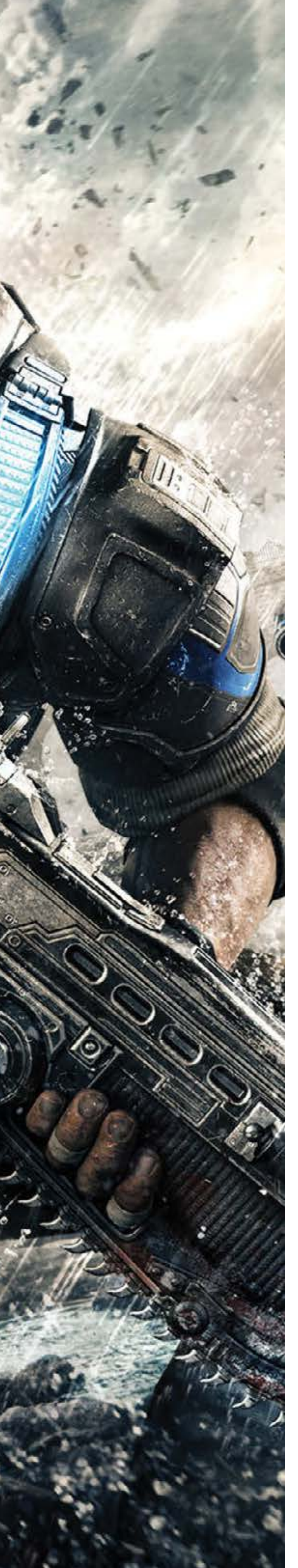
Reviews

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GEARS OF WAR 4

More of the same or a new era for this classic Xbox franchise? We find out what The Coalition has been cooking.





THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

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CAN THE COALITION FIGHT OFF THE SPECTRE OF EXPECTATION?

Gears Of War 4

In the months leading to the release of *Gears Of War 4*, long-serving producer and studio head Rod Fergusson was confident – defiant, almost – that the team he had assembled under The Coalition was prepared to bring such an integral Xbox-exclusive franchise into the next generation.

The old guards of *Gears* have gone, moved on to pastures new, but there stands Fergusson – as he has done so faithfully for a decade – peddling a familiar miasma of despair and destruction; a patchwork of blood and boisterousness, hope and fragility in a world shattered by enduring terror.

The message was clear from Fergusson: The Coalition was going to do it right before it did things differently. "We were afraid that if we tried to do things that were too revolutionary we would be judged harshly for taking something good and potentially breaking it," he told us earlier in the year. "[With] this first one, for us, we were like, 'do it right before you do it different'. We think this is an evolutionary step where hopefully people will find it feels smoother and faster and slicker but it's still, at its heart, *Gears Of War*."

For the ageing *Gears* fan, the first few hours of the campaign are distressing, perhaps more so because of comments like this. *Gears Of War 4* is certainly slicker and smoother, that much is obvious the second the sickeningly spectacular *Unreal Engine 4* whirls into action; sweeping us off into violent vignettes that recap events that are forever burned into the soil of Sera. Admittedly, it isn't faster, but that's okay – there is, after all, only so quickly one can manoeuvre between waist-high objects while under duress.

This is where *Gears Of War 4* first stumbles – in trying to needlessly shift the design and change the focus that has worked so successfully across a generation. The COG is initially shown to be the enemy. With the war against the Locust over, the outfit has become free to do what it always threatened to – develop a totalitarian state where its

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios
DEVELOPER: The Coalition
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

GEARS OF WAR: JUDGEMENT



AS GOOD AS



GEARS OF WAR



Above: The lightning storms and chaotic weather effects that are ravaging Sera are certainly an illuminating addition to *Gears Of War*, though they feel underused. Weather is used to ramp up the tension, though it perhaps should have had more effect on battlefield conditions.

Below: Like 343 Industries with *Halo* before it, The Coalition has demonstrated that while it has the technical ability to tackle a legacy franchise, it still needs time to adjust to the unique rhythm of a *Gears Of War* campaign.



FAQs

Q. SHOULD I CATCH UP?
This is the beginning of an all-new saga, which means the old trilogy isn't required reading, although a lot of the reveals will fall flat if you come in blind.

Q. HOW LONG IS THE CAMPAIGN?
The campaign in *Gears Of War 4* will take you about eight hours to complete, though it is littered with dozens of hidden collectibles to find.

Q. IS THE SHOTGUN STILL OVERPOWERED?
The Coalition may as well have cut the other weapons out of the multiplayer – the Gnasher shotgun still rules the battlefield.

Below: Of all the sub plots to actually find resolution, it's Kait's attempts to rescue her captured mother that resonates the best. We'd have liked to have seen her take the spotlight over whining JD.



THE COALITION WAS GOING TO DO IT RIGHT BEFORE IT DID THINGS DIFFERENTLY

people live in fear and seclusion. Mindless machines and propaganda posters litter the streets, forcing many – including our leading trio of JD, Del and Kait – to live as rebel fighters, 'Outsiders' that feed on the scraps of the COG to survive.

That's all fine, it's a direction the franchise had always threatened to go in, in-between the brooding and brash attitudes of those cast in the original trilogy. But there's also an integral problem with switching out monsters for machines – robots don't bleed. Splashes of oil do not satisfy the Lancer, nor do electric sparks or shimmering shrapnel. By putting you up against wave after wave of robotic enemy – reusing the same basic AI routines and spawn points - *Gears* loses a piece of its soul. Without the blood, *Gears* stops being fun and starts looking more and more like a standard cover-shooter.

Any attempts to subvert the standard *Gears Of War* experience are eventually left by the wayside, however, as The Coalition locks into a higher gear. Honestly, that change doesn't come soon enough. The playful banter spewing out of JD's mouth – played by actor Liam McIntyre, doing his best Nolan North/ Nathan Drake impression – is soon met and tempered by the arrival of series veteran (and estranged father) Marcus Fenix. The robots are soon replaced by familiar foes and an array of exotic new beasts, *Gears* is all the better once it ditches any illusion that it can survive without the Locust. Any complex story beats The Coalition attempted to develop and foster in the opening hours are quickly thrown on the fire and replaced with something far more basic and instinctual – kill monsters, save something. Just how the COG of old likes it.

The hours that follow represent *Gears Of War* at its best. It's fluid, gruesome and full of individual set pieces and innovative boss battles that'll have you unashamedly unleashing exotic curse words in near-constant elation. There's something carnal and immediately engaging, about *Gears Of War 4* once it hits its stride. It plays to an instinctual love we seem to have of skulking through decimated architecture, avoiding violent lightning storms and finding as many new ways as possible to eviscerate fleshy enemies. Eventually, *Gears Of War 4* becomes a wonderful celebration of everything that made the franchise great to begin with.

This is a feeling that extends over to *Gears Of War 4*'s supporting experiences, multiplayer and Horde Mode. Both have been revitalised, though they very rarely surprise. Imitation is, after all, the sincerest form of flattery – Epic Games set such a strong template that it's difficult to dispute the move to so closely recreate it. Much like the struggle 343 encountered when attempting to take on *Halo* for the first time after Bungie, the campaign represented the biggest opportunity to usher in change – something of a stumble here that labours into a sprint – whereas the multiplayer needs to feel familiar and sedated to appease the players that'll keep the game alive between subsequent sequels. *Gears Of War 4* is a success, then, even if it does take The Coalition a little too long to find its feet in its single-player campaign.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

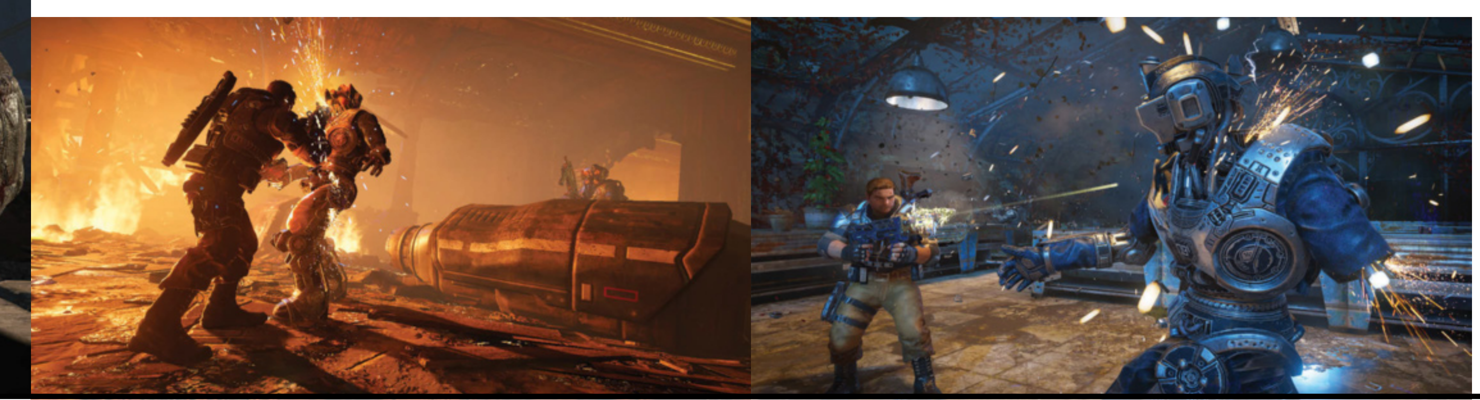
NEXT-GEN TECH: Hook an Xbox One S up to an HDR-ready TV with *Gears Of War 4* and prepare to have your mind blown by the most vibrant lighting to ever grace a videogame.

HOW DOES THE MULTIPLAYER HOLD UP?

The Coalition may have used the campaign to set up a new trilogy, but it's the multiplayer where the studio's understanding of the legacy really shines through. Jumping online is like slipping into an old pair of shoes – you know you should probably replace them with something new, but there's something comforting about the familiarity. This is classic *Gears* multiplayer, offering all the bloody and balanced chaos that *Gears 2* and *3* pulled off so excellently with a selection of fantastically designed multiplayer maps thrown in for good measure. For a new player, it will be tough to find your footing, but *Gears* veterans will feel instantly at home with the offering. Prepare to get eviscerated by shotgun blasts. Like, a lot.

VERDICT
IT GETS GOOD ONCE THE BLOOD STARTS FLOWING


gamesTMmag scored **8** for
Gears Of War 4
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



WHERE DO GANGSTERS GO WHEN THEY DIE?

Mafia III

Mafia III does not mince words. It's bloody, it's fast, it's intoxicating and irresistible. In that spirit, it's worth opening on a firm, frank point: *Mafia III* is the smartest and most original sandbox game in years. *Assassin's Creed*, nowadays, is drowning in lore, features and endless side-missions. This year's *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* was cold and dry. *Fallout 4* felt like business as usual. For the longest time, perhaps since *Assassin's Creed 2* – the wild success of which set a mould for open-world games – being able to explore at your own discretion has amounted, basically, to wandering around. Writers have struggled nobly to keep up – *Red Dead Redemption* in particular went to great, occasionally successful lengths to ensure John Marston and his revenge quest weren't lost amidst the player's random, chaotic behaviour. But story and characters have not been the sandbox game's strong point for years now. *Mafia III* is different. Not only is its dialogue punchy and its narrative cohesive, almost everything the player does fits perfectly with the game's overarching tone. Its depictions of racism and historical New Orleans (in the game, re-branded New Bordeaux) might suggest that *Mafia III* be played slowly and considerately. But no. Violent, cathartic and morally unambiguous, this is a raw vendetta fantasy. Play it right – screech to every mission in a stylish convertible, blaze *Born To Be Wild* on the stereo, joyfully and noisily smack down every enemy you find – and *Mafia III* becomes the finest, fieriest genre game of 2016. Other than the often maligned *Far Cry 2*, which gracefully used violence to decry violence, you will not find another open-world game designed around such a pure, single purpose. You are in *Mafia III* to wreak havoc. You are an avenging force of nature, tearing into the guts of any and every ugly facet of contemporary history. In short, the people you kill in *Mafia III* all deserve to die. The game is concentrated on equipping and encouraging you to blast racist assholes into the dirt where they belong.

VIOLENT, CATHARTIC AND MORALLY UNAMBIGUOUS, THIS IS A RAW VENDETTA FANTASY

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Hangar 13
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE HISTORY OF HANGAR 13?

Hangar 13 was set up by the publisher, 2K Games, specifically to oversee the *Mafia* series. *Mafia III* is the studio's first ever game

Q. IS MAFIA III CONNECTED TO THE PREVIOUS MAFIA GAMES?

Only tangentially. One of the central characters from *Mafia II* re-appears here and there are obviously similarities in terms of mechanics, but *Mafia III* is largely different from its predecessors

Q. WHEN AND WHERE IS MAFIA III SET?

1968 and a city called New Bordeaux, which is a close approximation of New Orleans, Louisiana. JFK is dead, the Vietnam War is still raging and the Black Civil Rights movement is at groundswell – all of these things colour the background of *Mafia III*.







Below: Missions in *Mafia III* can be get repetitive. You drive, you shoot, you drive away again, and it's always in pursuit of the same goal: cause as much havoc as possible. You need to get into the right mindset to really enjoy it

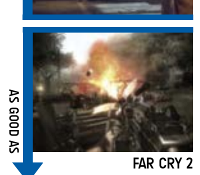


Above: Gunfights are plentiful but well-paced. You're often fighting small but strong groups of enemies, in places like restaurants and warehouses – even out in the street – where you have to keep moving and use cover **Left:** Lincoln Clay is one of the most appealing protagonists games have produced in a long time. His dialogue is sharp. His motivations are clear. Above all, you enjoy being alongside him throughout *Mafia III*.

BETTER THAN

MAFIA II





FAR CRY 2

AS GOOD AS



THE VINYL COUNTDOWN

Mafia III's soundtrack features some of the greatest records of the Sixties, everything from Sam Cooke to The Rolling Stones, Creedence Clearwater Revival and The Band. At times, the music feels a little too hand picked. You can imagine a room full of audio directors, searching through online lists of Sixties hits and jamming them into the game. But it hits hard. Screeching to your next gunfight to the ominous pulse of *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* or outrunning the cops to *Born To Be Wild* are some of *Mafia III*'s greatest spontaneous moments. The original score is excellent, too. Shootouts themselves are backed by energetic, jazz and rhythm and blues.

As Lincoln Clay, a Vietnam veteran, betrayed and left for dead by the eponymous Mafia, your quest is to dismantle and destroy all of New Bordeaux's existing organised crime. Moonshine stills, protection rackets, prostitution rings: everything is fair game, and by constantly providing you fresh guns, ammunition and money – and launching every mission on the fly without any loading screens – *Mafia III* pumps you up and cheers you on. Your objectives are simple. Your cause is righteous. The mob controlling New Bordeaux is comprised of Confederate flag waving yokels, old-school gangsters and corrupt cops. They're all dumb, ugly white boys; they all berate Lincoln with racist epithets. And *Mafia III* never strokes its chin and ponders if violence is really an answer – this is pulp fiction, an empowerment fantasy of a kind seen all too rarely in videogames, wherein the writers and designers have the conviction to directly assault modern day politics. Lincoln is irrepressible. Far from a customisable, malleable avatar – the kind often found starring in open-world games – he's an ingratiating, potent presence. Muscular, charismatic and sexy, you just love watching Clay unleash Hell. So attention grabbing is the violence, the racial overtone, the sheer thrust of *Mafia III* that you forgive – or perhaps don't even notice – its other shortcomings. It isn't, by today's standards, a great looking game. Yes, the city does feel underpopulated and airless. And absolutely, the mission structure is repetitive – each gunfight is a variation on the last. But this is a game where you gun down a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan to the beat of Sixties rock 'n' roll. The typical criticisms one might levy at a sandbox game feel petty and irrelevant.

So what's actually wrong with *Mafia III*? For a start, it's too long. The car chases and shootouts are good enough to sustain your attention and excitement for ten or so hours – more than most videogames manage – but in its final third, *Mafia III* begins to drag. The story is simple but told using a lot of clutter. Timelines intersect. Cutscenes play over one another. Especially in its later stages, it becomes almost impossible to keep track of who you're killing and why. At their worst, *Mafia III*'s missions are busy – the screen becomes overwhelmed by pop-ups and mini-map markers, dragging your attention in various directions. And although lean compared to most of its peers, *Mafia III* still includes plenty of perfunctory sandbox game junk. Half-baked side missions, boring collectibles and character upgrades all detract from the game's otherwise electric pace. At times, considering how gratuitous and gleefully brazen it is, the sheer amount of stuff in *Mafia III* feels appropriate. Kill, find, grab, kill, get, spend. It feels like a good rhythm. But some elements are present only because they're available in other sandbox games. When it tries to fit in with its contemporaries, *Mafia III* loses its wonderful, distinct identity.

SYNTHESIS

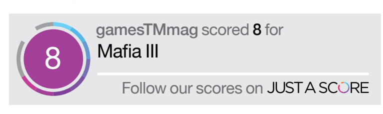
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

RIVAL GANGS: Open-world games and quality writing have, for a long time, seemed diametrically opposed to one another. But *Mafia III*, a non-stop action game about a bloody revenge quest, gracefully unites them.

Nevertheless, given the current condition of big videogames – big not just in the sense of virtual geography, but budgets, team size, marketing et cetera – *Mafia III* feels like a small miracle. A sandbox game not only with a cohesive story, but a cohesive story about a young black man waging war against white institutions – how the hell did this get made? On the surface, *Mafia III* is yet another sandbox crime game. But lose yourself to its machismo and tone, and verily, you will find yourself playing something you have never experienced before.

VERDICT

A SMART, FOCUSED GAME THAT MERGES STORY AND ACTION





Above: In the game's first ten minutes you're thrust into a race against a Jeep dangling from a helicopter. It's one of five amazing showcase events littered throughout the *Horizon 3*'s lengthy career.

PLAYGROUND GAMES MAKES IT THREE ON THE TROT

Forza Horizon 3

In *Forza Horizon 3*'s opening moments, you'll zoom a Lamborghini across picturesque hillsides, transition seamlessly to a pack of 4x4s hurtling along Byron Bay, before racing through the dense rainforest against a Jeep that's dangling from the bottom of a helicopter. It's a supremely confident introduction that epitomises Playground Games' latest *Forza* spin-off; a game that's not only the best iteration of an already excellent series, but one of the best open-world racers ever made.

It's an unexpected surprise – after all, who would've thought that, after 2012's *Forza Horizon* and its follow-up, Playground would find so many new and ingenious ways to take its formula even further – but somehow *Horizon 3* feels fresher than ever. From the get-go, it successfully builds upon every facet of its predecessors.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Playground Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

The most immediately striking change is its location; the aggressively vibrant Australian landscape is a stark contrast to *Horizon 2*'s comparatively placid slice of Mediterranea. From the sandy beaches of Byron Bay to long, wide-open highways of dusty outback; quiet suburbia to the glass and steel gleam of Surfer's Paradise, and the sprawling maze of the rainforest to the wine country's green fields, *Forza Horizon 3*'s condensed Australian sprawl is not so much inspired by life down under as it is turbocharged by it.

FORZA HORIZON 3'S AUSTRALIAN SPRAWL IS NOT SO MUCH INSPIRED BY LIFE DOWN UNDER AS IT IS TURBOCHARGED BY IT

The game's events flourish because of these beyond-real shifts in landscape. There's a much greater focus on off-road competition – which some *Forza* aficionados may frown at – but there's also an exhilarating mix of content, as races mix-and-match between slippery mud and sun-scorched asphalt. The weather changes affect racing too, with the damp undergrowth of the rainforest making for tricky racing, and the time of day bathes the world in a wonderful array of colours. *Forza Horizon 3*'s new global illumination brings everything to life from sunrise to sunset. After dark, the midnight head-to-heads feel reminiscent of *Need for Speed*'s glorious heyday as you pelt a Ferrari 458 down an open road with just your headlamps paving the way through the blackness.

The game's biggest structural shift is that you're now the boss of the *Horizon* festival. This doesn't mean you've cashed in

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY SHOWCASE EVENTS?

A: There are five in total. It's not as many as we'd like, but they're all great.

Q. HOW'S CO-OP?

A: Co-op's good fun, but it wasn't the main draw for us.

Q. IS IT BIGGER THAN FORZA HORIZON 2?

A: Oh, absolutely. It feels far more like a real open world



Below: PR stunts like this drift event earn you fans while out in the world. Just drive up to them to automatically start accruing points.



Right: Customisation of your cars is still a huge part of amassing a unique roster in your garage. Add rear wings to old muscle cars, or soup up a Ferrari beyond your wildest dreams, it's all here as you would expect from a *Forza* game.

on the riches and taken a desk job; quite the opposite. Being in charge of how the festival is run, you're able to set up your own events, and *Forza Horizon 3*'s variety is bordering on daunting. With every race you set up and enter, you can pick from a huge number of preset variants, from hypercar races to off-road buggy derbies, and the game never seems to stop offering up new race types. Add in the fact that you'll open up the ability to create your own events – a feature named Horizon Blueprint, which provides you with even greater levels of customisation – as well as events created by your friends, and *Forza Horizon 3* is without doubt the broadest, deepest *Forza* game yet; one that never forces you to stop racing the cars you enjoy.

All of this is fuelled by its multifaceted progression system. By completing PR stunts – think hidden jumps, speed traps and skill tests – and races, you'll earn fans, growing the festival. At every major milestone you'll get the opportunity to expand the festival, choosing a location you want to set up camp and watching more events unlock. You'll also earn money for buying cars – of which there are hundreds – and skill points for levelling up, which are offered up with practically everything you do, from smashing through XP signs to rear-ending any unfortunate traffic.

The variety extends to almost every single component of the game. With 350 cars, *Horizon 3* retains the automotive breadth *Forza* is famous for, from customising your own paint-jobs to tweaking the bodywork. There's still satisfaction in amassing a diverse garage, and the game makes practically every type of car feel relevant in spite of their top-speeds. We never really knew how much fun we'd have buying a new Tesla and taking it for a spin; the silent purr of its carbon-free electrical engine is a far cry from the roar of the new Ford GT, but just driving around in one was still mesmerising.

And it's the ability to just drive that makes *Forza Horizon 3* so compelling. While *Forza Motorsport* makes a huge fuss about obsessing over the most minute details, *Forza Horizon 3* seems to nail all the minutiae – how cars look, move, sound – without as much effort. When you buy or win a car in *Horizon 3* – the lucky dip tombola from previous games returns – there's a sense that that vehicle is now yours. Take your new (old) Shelby GT for a cruise, or finally see what the Koenigsegg Regera can do by driving it out into the outback and putting your foot down without having to worry about any unwanted corners.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LAND DOWN UNDER: *Forza Horizon 3*'s world is like nothing else in the *Forza* series. It sacks off the beautiful but relatively peaceful slice of southern France/northern Italy that hosted its predecessor, and instead goes for all-out colourful action in Australia.

If there are problems, they're few and far between. The game's characters are still cardboard cutout caricatures, but they're far less grating than their awful predecessors. The AI is also a little bit uneven, with events seeming to hover between slightly too tough and a little bit too easy, but there's no criticising the huge number of assists and difficulty options that at least give you the ability to tailor the racing experience to how you please.

The overall result is a sublime racer, one that far exceeds the expectations of a spin-off series' threequel. Four years ago, Playground Games set out to humanise the *Forza* series; to rough it up a bit. *Horizon 3* stands tall as a game about cars that isn't scared to have fun in the name of big engines and nice rims, and raises the bar for open-world racers in the process.

GROOVE MUSIC BABY

One of *Forza Horizon 3*'s coolest features is how it ties in Microsoft's Groove Music and basically lets you create your own radio station. There are already a handful of preset stations in the game, and they range from optimistic modern dance like CHVRCHES to classical concertos (genuinely). It's a fantastic mix, but the way Groove Music's integration works is super cool; the game's post-processing features make your tunes sound like they're blasting out from the Horizon festival's grandstands. It's a feature we're sure most Xbox One owners will overlook, but it's a lovely little touch.

BETTER THAN

FORZA HORIZON 2



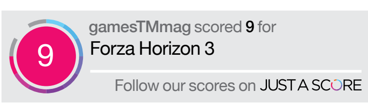


WORSE THAN

BURNOUT PARADISE

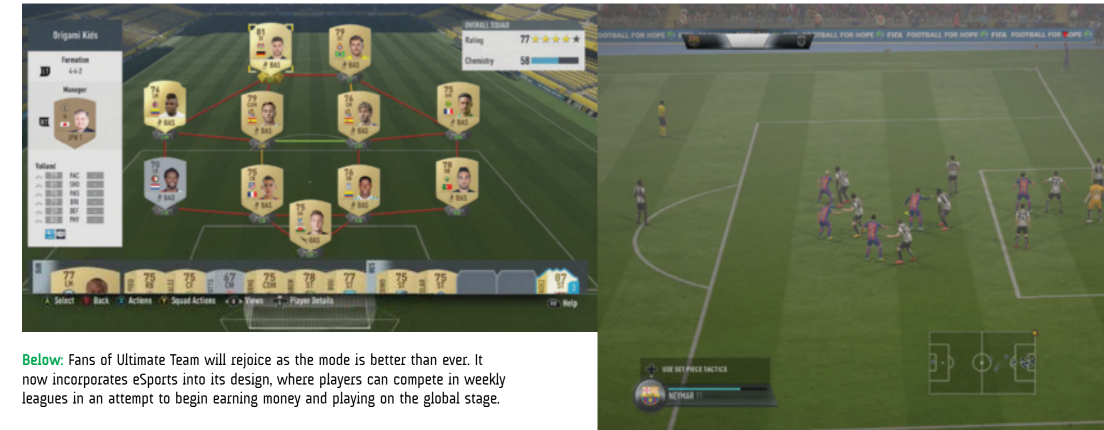
VERDICT

HORIZON 3 IS THE BEST OPEN WORLD RACER IN YEARS



WHAT HAPPENED TO SET PIECES?

One of the biggest changes this year comes to all set-pieces up and down the pitch. Some are pretty great, such as improved throw-ins and the ability to exert greater control over goal kicks, however corners, free kicks and penalties will take some getting used to. Corners have been expanded to allow for better positioning in the box, giving players with an abundance of strength the opportunity to rise above their markers and fire home from the break – it's an interesting new system so long as you can get your head around the placement of the cursor. As for penalties, many players will now likely dread stepping up to the spot. They are incredibly difficult to get right, with most either soaring into the car park or limply rolling towards the goalkeeper.



Below: Fans of Ultimate Team will rejoice as the mode is better than ever. It now incorporates eSports into its design, where players can compete in weekly leagues in an attempt to begin earning money and playing on the global stage.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: EA Canada
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

THE JOURNEY IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

FIFA 17

Success leads to complacency that in turn breeds contempt – that's the inherent problem with a development cycle that favours speed over finesse. With a resurgent rival in the form of *Pro Evolution Soccer*, EA had to return to the pitch in 2017 fresh and vibrant, innovating in a handful of key areas. *FIFA 17* is, then, EA's attempt to build a sports simulation that covers every eventuality of play. There is, in actuality, so much content packed away inside of it that it's almost unreasonable to consider that any one player will ever get to see it all.

Between *FIFA*'s card-collecting Ultimate Team package, the stabilisation of Online Seasons, Be A Pro and even the simplest of exhibition matches, it would almost be greedy to demand more. But here we are, staring down a 15-hour campaign mode that looks to blur the lines between *Mass Effect* and pretty much every sporting fairytale Hollywood has ever tried to shove down your throat.

No, we haven't gone crazy. When we say *Mass Effect*, we mean it. The Journey charts the rise of 17-year old Alex Hunter, taking you through the first year of a Premier League career in what amounts to a highly improved Be A Pro simulation. Two points of note: firstly, having to deal with the realities of being a young player on the rise meant understanding some harsh realities about the way in which the Premier League operates. Secondly, at some point The Journey will force you out on loan, and starting a career at Arsenal only to end up begrudgingly choosing between Aston Villa, Norwich or Newcastle was a serious stomach punch. Thanks for that EA.



Below: While the 'goal feel' still might lag behind *PES*, it's certainly satisfying to score goals in *FIFA 17*, especially with the introduction of proper low-bearing shots.



FAQs

Q. HOW DO THE LAST-GEN VERSIONS HOLD UP?
The Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions don't include The Journey. That mode is exclusive to the current-gen consoles.

Q. HOW IS ULTIMATE TEAM?
Some improvements to the presentation ensure it's easier to get into than ever.

Q. IS IT BETTER THAN PES 2017?
If you like measured build-up play, *PES* is still the game for you.

Below: Changes to corner taking (and other set pieces for that matter) take some getting used to, but we actually quite liked the resultant chaotic scramble a good delivery can create. It feels much more dynamic, risky and creative to take a corner now than it used to.



But anyway, we digress. To help really show off *FIFA*'s transition from the tired *Ignite Engine* to the all-powerful *Frostbite Engine*, EA Canada enlisted the assistance of BioWare to bring a little flair to the new mode. Interlaced with fully voice acted and motion captured cut-scenes – heaping as much emotional baggage onto events as humanly possible – you'll encounter dialogue options that let you take command of post-match interviews and integral story moments. Think of yourself as Commander Shepard, only you aren't tasked with saving the world but instead navigate the trials of post-match interviews.

It's linear with a likeable cast, and the story is heart-warming albeit without any originality. In spite of all the reasons to hate on the idea of a single-player RPG in *FIFA*, The Journey actually brings the entire package together. It isn't the most complex game mode in the world – and you'll routinely become frustrated with a scoring system that seems eager to punish you for the tiniest mistakes – but there's nothing quite like The Journey out there. It keeps *FIFA* from feeling stale, even if this year's iteration is doing very little to alter or improve upon the on-pitch action.

As you'd expect, *FIFA 17* looks gorgeous. That should honestly come as no surprise; the engine powering the likes of *Star Wars Battlefront* and *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is no slouch after all. Player likenesses have been improved, most of the Premier League bosses have been scanned into the game (many of which are simply unsettling) and the volumetric lighting makes a particular impression on a misty evening kick off. Sadly, this can often feel like a mere distraction – to keep you from peering too closely to the old bones beneath the rejuvenated skin.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

KITTED OUT: While it's a rather obvious thing to point out, the inclusion of fully-licensed kits and managers really helps foster immersion. This is one area where *FIFA* will always beat *PES*.

If *PES* has been transformative over the past three seasons, *FIFA* has been laboured. EA has slowly been bringing improvements to its flagship sports sim. The basics are as familiar as ever – the passing, shooting and dribbling are all tight and responsive when isolated, but when they come together it can feel as if you are playing football through quick sand; players are once again over-animated, where they often feel as if they are compensating for every nuance imaginable, and that can bring play to a frustrating, calculating halt.

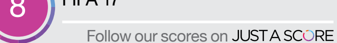
One of the biggest shifts here is with physicality, and with that comes complications to attacking and defending. Up front, those centre forwards with big Strength stats will relentlessly hold defenders off of the ball – especially as you begin escalating the difficulty up to World Class. Defending has taken yet another hit in 2017, though *FIFA* has favoured attacking with force over a well-balanced game across the pitch.

There is so much value for money that it's difficult to not give *FIFA 17* a recommendation. Sure, *PES 2017* may once again rule the play through the midfield, but *FIFA 17* has so much to offer off the pitch that it's difficult to not be satisfied. As long as you can get your head around the possession-focused style of play in *FIFA*, you'll have no qualms with its gameplay, but it's everything else that really sells it this year. Some subtle improvements to Ultimate Team (and its online security), the introduction of The Journey and the level of polish overall make for a satisfying package.

VERDICT

ANOTHER STEP TOWARDS DOMINANCE

8 gamesTMmag scored **8** for FIFA 17



(P)AINT AS GOOD AS IT USED TO BE

Paper Mario: Color Splash

You know when you see a picture of the actor you used to fancy when you were at school? The one you had a huge, A3 poster of above your bed? And now they're all haggard and saggy after 30 years of aging and substance abuse? Okay, the *Paper Mario* series isn't exactly like that, but it's maybe a *little* like that.

Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door on the GameCube is one of the best games of all time, and so it's a shame to see the series go from such highs to the lows of *Sticker Star*, and now *Color Splash*. It might be easier if they were totally terrible games, but they aren't – they're just so incredibly *dull*. The *Paper Mario* games – to go back to that analogy – used to be these studly, beefy titles, packed with effortless humour and incredible, inventive level design. *Color Splash*, like *Sticker Star*, relies on gimmicks, and treats its audience like complete idiots.

This is *Color Splash*'s main problem: it thinks you are very stupid. Perhaps, it could be argued, this is because it's a game aimed at children – but that's an easy trap to fall into. Children are not stupid. Have you seen what children do with *Minecraft*? Did you know that some children are building their own games? There is an actual BAFTA Games category for children between 10 and 14 years of age. Children are not stupid, and they deserve to be treated better than this.

The plot is unexciting and predictable: Bowser finds a new toy, steals a bunch of Paint Stars (why does everything function on stars in Mario's world?) and kidnaps Peach. So far, so blah. You find a companion, Huey, an over-enthusiastic paint can, and he offers to help you do all the things you need to do to help out the colour-drained world of Prism Island.

Many of *Color Splash*'s issues lie with that damn paint can. From the very first moment you meet him – in which he reminds you *every two minutes* that you can talk to him if you need help, like a needy bank assistant – he makes the game unpleasantly patronising. Huey is constantly repeating things that are painfully obvious, telling you bits of information that you have already figured out from the environmental storytelling, and generally being tedious and unnecessary.

Imagine playing an old-school *Mario* level and having a Toad pop up to remind you that jumping is good, or that you can hit blocks to gain items, or that your name is Mario. It's like that.

The main conceit of the game is that Huey has imbued your hammer with the power of paint, and it's up to you to restore colour to all the walls, floors and people of Prism Island by hitting them with your hammer in a satisfying splat of Dulux's finest. Hitting flattened Toads with your hammer is relatively fun, but then the game takes this gimmick and flogs it to death. *Everything* requires paint, but paint is so easy to find by hitting grass, trees, enemies and blocks

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: There are some lovely design choices – the peel of a paper bridge, the cutouts of the clouds in the backgrounds. *Color Splash* looks great.



Above: After cleaning up a whole island in *Super Mario Sunshine*, *Paper Mario* decides to take the opposite tack and instead pour entire buckets of paint over Prism Island. But apparently, they love it. Mixed messages.





Right: *Color Splash* is more like *Sticker Star* than the excellent old-school *Paper Mario* games like *Thousand-Year Door*, and *Sticker Star* just wasn't very good. *Color Splash* is better, larger and funnier… but that's not enough to rescue it from its flaws.

THERE ARE A WHOLE LOAD OF THINGS TO DO IN COLOR SPLASH, BUT NONE OF THEM FEEL THAT ENTICING



PAPER MARIO: STICKER STAR

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

FAQs

Q. CAN YOU AVOID COMBAT?

You can attempt to dodge the overworld enemies, and when your hammer is more powerful you can one-hit-kill them, too.

Q. HOW LONG IS THE GAME?

Roughly 30-50 hours, as there are quite a few levels and you'll have to keep going back and forth to earlier stages, too.

Q. CAN YOU UPGRADE MARIO?

His health, card slots and paint capacity can all be upgraded, either through the plot or by collecting hammer pieces after battles.

TOADS ARE THE WORST

For some reason, the latest *Paper Mario* games have been absolutely obsessed with Toads. They formed the majority of the population in *Sticker Star* and *Paper Jam*, and it's totally bizarre, because Nintendo doesn't seem to realise that the whole point of Toads is that they're incredibly boring little guys. What's your incentive to help the tiny mushroom-headed idiots? They keep getting themselves into pickles, but who would really notice if one more went missing? They all look the same anyway! *Thousand-Year Door* had a cast of Bob-Ombs, Koopas, shadow people and wrestlers, which are all roughly ten billion times more interesting than Toads. Can't we go back to that?



that it becomes an inflated economy where you don't have any reason to really care how much paint you're using.

The combat system, which is basically the same as *Sticker Star*'s but with cards instead of stickers, requires paint to work properly. You choose a battle card – jump, hammer, or any number of variants on that theme – and paint it to increase its base attack. Then, you flick it towards the screen. Sounds like an exciting use of the GamePad, right? No, not really. You'll spend more time looking at that tiny screen during battles – poking and tapping and flicking those cards – than you will actually engaging with what's on screen.

Some battles require Thing cards – special, one-off cards that trigger a small cut-scene – and just like *Sticker Star*, these are incredibly frustrating. It can be hard to find them, and even harder to figure out which one to use at the right time. Worse still, some boss battles depend on you using exactly the right card, and it's not always entirely clear which one, especially if you haven't already found it. And then you have to look up what it is you need, trudge back to an earlier level, then return to the boss battle, and doesn't that sound incredible boring? Yes.

There are a whole load of things to do in *Color Splash*, but none of them feel that enticing. You can go back to levels you completed to find more secrets, more Paint Stars, and more cards – but all that does is feed back into the combat system, and the combat system is *boring*. There are Roshambo stadiums, which task you with winning a certain number of rock-paper-scissors matches in a go. It's far too easy to win money, making the coin economy another pointless number in the game, and it's also just a game of luck, so it's quite difficult to win several times in a row. In short: it is also boring.

It feels like such a shame to come away from *Color Splash* with nothing but a crippling feeling of utter boredom. It's a beautiful game, truly – dynamic lighting, thoughtful animations, and the whole paper aesthetic done perfectly – but if you're not having fun playing a game that's meant to be fun, what good is it? Maybe we'll never get back to the good old days of *Paper Mario* – our childhood sweetheart, our teenage crush – and if this is what the series has become, then maybe it's time to take down that poster and give up hope once and for all. We can still appreciate the good times we had together, but now it's just a boring, bloated version of what once was.

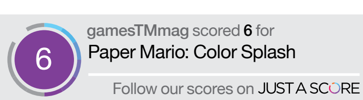
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SQUASHING THINGS: *Color Splash* is better than *Sticker Star* in at least one regard: Thing cards. *Sticker Star* required you to get Things "squashed" for a fee – *Color Splash* does it automatically. Yay?

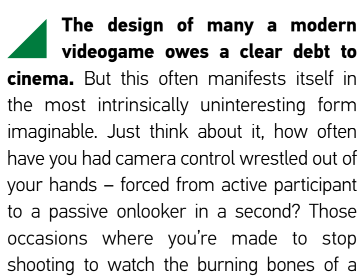
VERDICT

A DISAPPOINTING NEW STEP IN A DECLINING SERIES

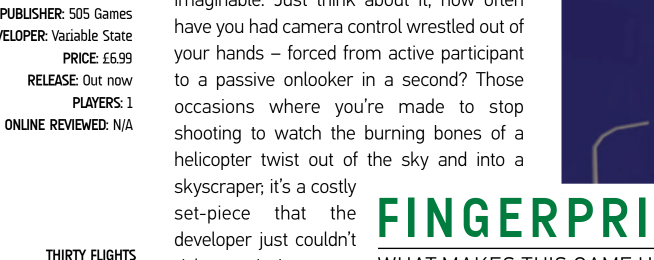


POWERFUL AND EXPERIMENTAL, IS THIS THE FUTURE OF FICTION?

Virginia



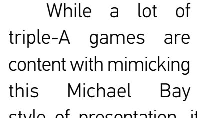
Above: *Virginia* doesn't waste your time. It uses cinematic tricks to move the story along, cutting scenes early once you've gleaned everything you need to and immediately placing you in a new scenario in a fashion similar to the way *Twin Peaks* or *The X-Files* tell a story.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC, Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: 505 Games
DEVELOPER: Variable State
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
THIRTY FLIGHTS OF LOVING



WORSE THAN
JOURNEY

The design of many a modern videogame owes a clear debt to cinema. But this often manifests itself in the most intrinsically uninteresting form imaginable. Just think about it, how often have you had camera control wrestled out of your hands – forced from active participant to a passive onlooker in a second? Those occasions where you're made to stop shooting to watch the burning bones of a helicopter twist out of the sky and into a skyscraper; it's a costly set-piece that the developer just couldn't risk you missing.

While a lot of triple-A games are content with mimicking this Michael Bay style of presentation, it isn't for emotional effect but to help fill gaps in gameplay – very few developers are confident enough to delve into the minutiae of the craft. This is where *Virginia* straddles the line between success and failure, leaning on the workings of filmmakers Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein to evoke a powerful sense of style and focus. For better or for worse, *Virginia* is a slave to the edit.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

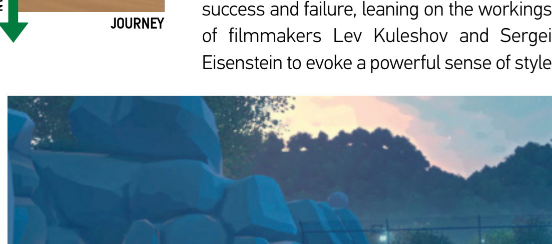
SILENT STORY: Despite being a narrative-focused game, *Virginia* doesn't feature one piece of dialogue. Instead the score and framing of the camera combine impressively to tell the story.

In *Virginia* it's difficult to know whether you are ever truly an active participant or merely a passive onlooker with minimal camera control throughout. It's a clever subversion of videogame design, a first-person adventure formed around visual comprehension. Without a single word of dialogue, *Virginia* attempts to tell a story of friendship and duty, identity and equality. After two hours in the company of its two FBI investigators – protagonist Anne Tarver and her partner Maria Halperin – on the hunt for a missing boy, it's likely you'll come away with a different interpretation of the events than the person sitting next to you.

It's a game about – as much as it is anything else – the effect of montage, where a scene's meaning is created in the edit itself. *Virginia* flashes between its scenes in a fashion that, while initially haphazard, quickly finds a satisfying rhythm. Movement triggers progress and hitting certain cues – such as approaching the correct person in a room, finding a contextual clue, or walking a certain distance down a corridor – will shift location and perspective, just like the swift edits seen in TV shows. It's through the pace of the edit that you'll see that narrative unfold.

The story is told through subtlety and intuition, with your ability to discern emotion through body language, and to see through the framing of individual moments making up the bulk of the experience. Because that's what *Virginia* is, really, an *experience*. It uses the language of videogames to tell a story that is unlike any other; a predefined narrative in which you activate progression and witness the effects.

Virginia is as unique as it is inspired, a videogame that puts you in the shoes of an editor – letting *you* decide the shot, offering interaction at a narrative level as opposed to systemic or mechanical one. It isn't for everybody, and it doesn't always work as intended, but if you're willing to give *Virginia* a chance for what it is, you might just get a glimpse into the next evolution of interactive entertainment and storytelling.



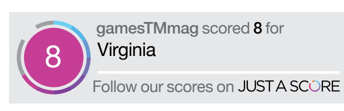




Above: There is very little interaction in *Virginia*, at least in a traditional sense. You progress forward through scenes, occasionally press X at predetermined times and move on. It's your ability to understand the story from the limited interaction provided that makes *Virginia* so intriguing.



VERDICT
AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE UNLIKE ANY OTHER





HONK IF YOU LOVE WOLFPACK ROUNDS

Destiny: Rise of Iron

You can't help but admire the Exotic legs on *Destiny*. For a game that was slammed at launch for how little content there was compared to what had been shown off in the run-up to release, Bungie's ridiculously tight core systems have kept numbers healthy and ensured huge spikes in new and returning Guardians with every single content drop. Few shooters can boast living into their third year with a sizeable chunk of their player base intact – arguably only *Battlefield 4* this generation, aside from *Destiny* – and while this latest update doesn't make such bold strides as *The Taken King*, that's largely because the last few expansions already did such a good job of reforging the *Destiny* experience into what many wanted and expected from the game all along.

Story content is brief but largely satisfying (only the pointless reverse run of the Dust Palace really falls flat), but it's the stuff that surrounds it that truly makes *Rise Of Iron* worthwhile. A record book akin to that introduced to document Moments Of Triumph tracks your accomplishments across all areas of the game, ensuring that rewards are drip-fed throughout your time with the expansion. The new Patrol area is neat and surprisingly expansive, with new mission types and secrets to unravel; new and reworked Strikes freshen up playlists and refine the loot system; new Crucible maps seem to slot into rotation well, while new mode Supremacy (basically Kill Confirmed – loot Engrams dropped by defeated enemies to score, return friendly ones to deny the enemy points) presents an interesting shift in the meta, favouring close-range engagement in terms of both gear and Supers. It's the new Raid that comes out on top, however, and it's arguably the best one yet. Areas are large and ripe for exploration, jump puzzles are kept mercifully brief, every boss fight feels original and exciting, and there's a laser focus on skill and coordination during encounters – plus the rewards it offers are largely excellent.

It's difficult to see what more could have been done within the aging core framework of *Destiny*, especially if rumours that much of the team are already busying themselves with a sequel are to be believed. Content continues to roll out and be discovered, as it likely will throughout *Destiny*'s third year. Seasonal events will return and Hard mode for Wrath Of The Machine is still to drop at the time of writing. However the impression remains that there will need to be another significant update akin to the one we saw in April, if not larger (update those old Raids please, Bungie) if the game is to make it to the end of its third year in as great a state as it stands today.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Bungie
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

DESTINY: THE DARK BELOW





WORSE THAN

DESTINY: THE TAKEN KING

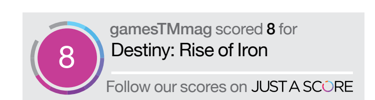
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

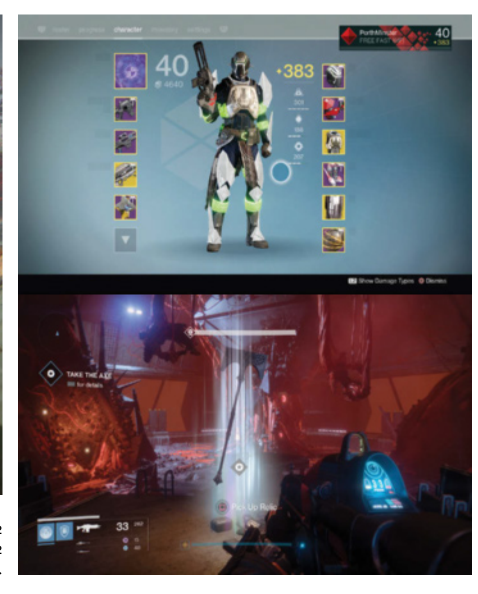
MORE OF THE SAME: Those who complained about reskinning in the past will find *Rise Of Iron* the most egregious update yet – a lot of enemies, areas and gear are updated old stuff rather than genuinely new.

VERDICT

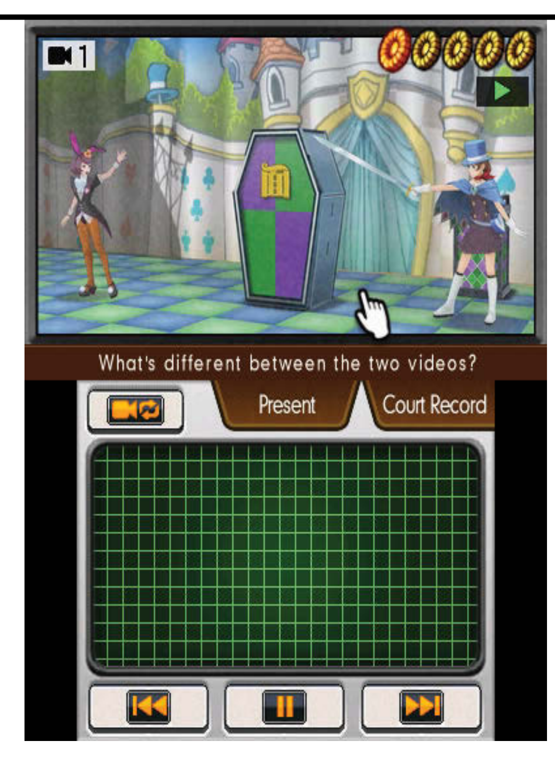
A STRONG IF EXTREMELY FAMILIAR UPDATE



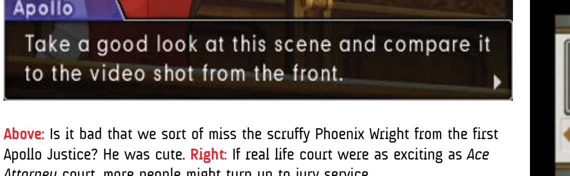


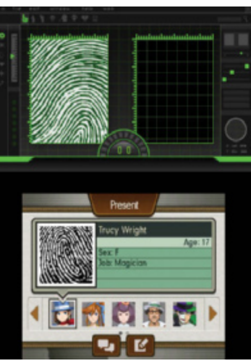


Above: Scorch Cannons now come in all three elemental flavours, although they all handle exactly the same. Remember to hold the trigger for even more damage. **Right:** For some reason, there's a new Exotic sword rather than an axe like the one used in both the story and marketing. Seems like a missed opportunity to us…









Above: Is it bad that we sort of miss the scruffy Phoenix Wright from the first Apollo Justice? He was cute. **Right:** If real life court were as exciting as *Ace Attorney* court, more people might turn up to jury service.

A SHADOW OF ITS FORMER SELF

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit Of Justice

***Ace Attorney* is a master of minutia – the intricate waltzes between testimony and evidence; the tension-filled tango between defence and prosecution.** It's also a game where characters have names like Luke Atmey and Jack Hammer. It's a beautiful yin-yang of subtlety and obviousness.

Spirit Of Justice is a little less well-balanced than its predecessors. You begin the game with a character called Ahlbi Ur'Gaid, who will be Ur Gaid. Get it? Not 15 minutes later, you meet a hippy called Pees'lubn Andistan'dhin and you roll your eyes so hard that they just fall right out of your skull.

Set partly in a foreign country, Khura'in, where we follow Phoenix Wright's struggle through a court that really, really hates lawyers, and partly back home with relative newcomers Apollo Justice, Athena Cykes and Trucy Wright, *Spirit Of Justice* attempts to juggle a bunch of new ideas and concepts that occasionally work brilliantly but sometimes fall flat.

The problem with *Spirit Of Justice* isn't that it's not good – if you love the *Ace Attorney* series, you'll love this game too – it's just that it seems to have thrown the subtlety out of the window. It's truly a beautiful game, with the kind of detailed and fluid animation that can hypnotise you, and the background art is so incredibly lovely that you might end up booking a one-way flight to Khura'in… if it actually existed.

But *Ace Attorney* is, at its heart, a visual novel – an awful lot of talking with only one possible outcome – and *Spirit Of Justice* seems to have lost confidence in that format, filling the time in-between court sessions with lots of mini-games. They're mostly entertaining and pleasantly tactile, tasking you with things like spinning a piece of evidence around to find secrets or finding someone's nervous tic to expose a lie, but there are others that are needlessly tedious, requiring you to tap-tap-tap-tap on a piece of evidence to expose fingerprints.

The addition of the in-court Divination Seance – in which you get to see the deceased's final moments – is also confusing, insubstantial and feels a lot like filler, as you have to point out inconsistencies in their last thoughts. Honestly, the game could have done without it – it's just a repetition of the witness statements, really, and it can sometimes feel like the game is beating you over the head with the whole mysticism angle it's gone for.

There's a wonderful nugget of a game in *Spirit Of Justice*. The writing, as always, is gripping and clever – even if the puns aren't – and the series hasn't looked this special since the intricate sprite art animations of the first three games. It's a shame that it's wrapped up in what feels like nervousness – the worry that a visual novel can't compete with the big boys.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

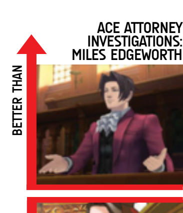
NEW GIMMICKS: A guy who does his entire testimony as a rock song. It's cool, okay?
MYSTICISM: The courtroom drama is totally overhauled by a religion-based legal system that hates lawyers.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ACE ATTORNEY INVESTIGATIONS: MILES EDGEWORTH



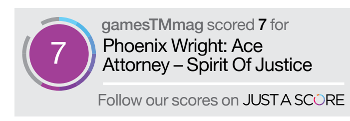


WORSE THAN

PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY – TRIALS & TRIBULATIONS

VERDICT

GORGEOUS, BUT LET DOWN BY A LACK OF CONFIDENCE



THE RE-ENERGISED ARCADE MASCOT SUFFERS A DIFFICULT SECOND ALBUM

Pac-Man Championship Edition 2



Above: While it does have a few too many elements for its own good, *CE2* still has that quintessential arcade magic about it. From the neon colour scheme to the *Tekken*-esque techno soundtrack, you can almost feel your trainers sticking to the floor.

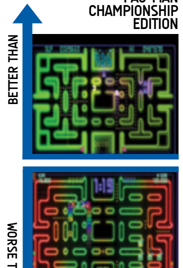
DETAILS

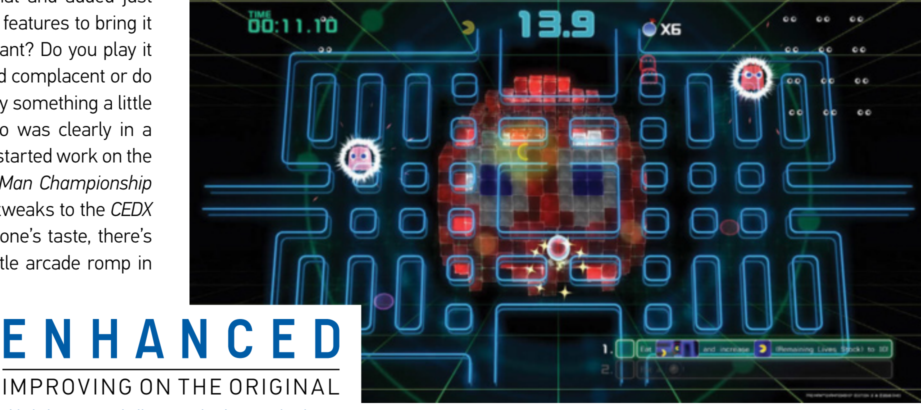
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



How do you follow up a game that's universally beloved? A title that took a classic format and added just the right amount of new features to bring it feel both retro and relevant? Do you play it safe and risk being called complacent or do you take a chance and try something a little different? Bandai Namco was clearly in a gambling mood when it started work on the follow up to 2010's *Pac-Man Championship Edition DX*, and while its tweaks to the *CEDX* recipe won't be to everyone's taste, there's definitely an addictive little arcade romp in there somewhere.

Okay, so let's deal with the neon-coloured elephant in the room: is it as good as *CEDX*? No, but then again how could it be? That six-year-old game is nigh on perfect and exemplified that pick up and play magic that rarely translates from arcade cabinet to home console. *CE2*, on the other hand, makes some pretty big updates that create a far more tactical feel. It takes time to get used to these new features, meaning your first few hours will likely stray into 'swear words that would make your mother faint' territory. There's a tutorial mode, thanks to the sheer amount of changes to the status quo.





ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

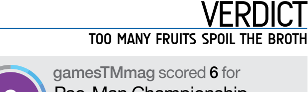
This being 2016 and all, *CE2* marks the occasion by adding in meters that fill up every time you eat a pellet. It's actually a pretty neat feature, but it's hard to track when the chaos ramps up.

For a start, being touched by ghosts won't cause Pac-Man to lose a life. Shock horror, right? Instead, it takes a few hits to aggro them into an surly state before they suddenly start chasing you round with a vengeance. On the lower difficulties it enables you a saving grace as you accidently turn a corner into a ghostly encounter, but ramp it up to Extreme and the sheer number of sleeping ghosts introduced in *CEDX* become impossible to avoid, so you're perpetually being hunted down by enemies you can't outrun.

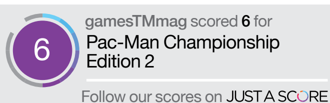
Bombs and bomb jumps are also a new feature, which enable you to warp back to the 'safe zone' of each maze when things get a little too hairy. It's clearly a safety valve Bandai Namco added to negate the craziness of the later levels and difficulties, but it just doesn't fit the series and ends up feeling like an unjust get out of jail free card. *CE2* even adds in boss battles to the mix – they're more an added twist on the end of a maze run, and while they're fun the first few times, the novelty inevitably ends up wearing off.

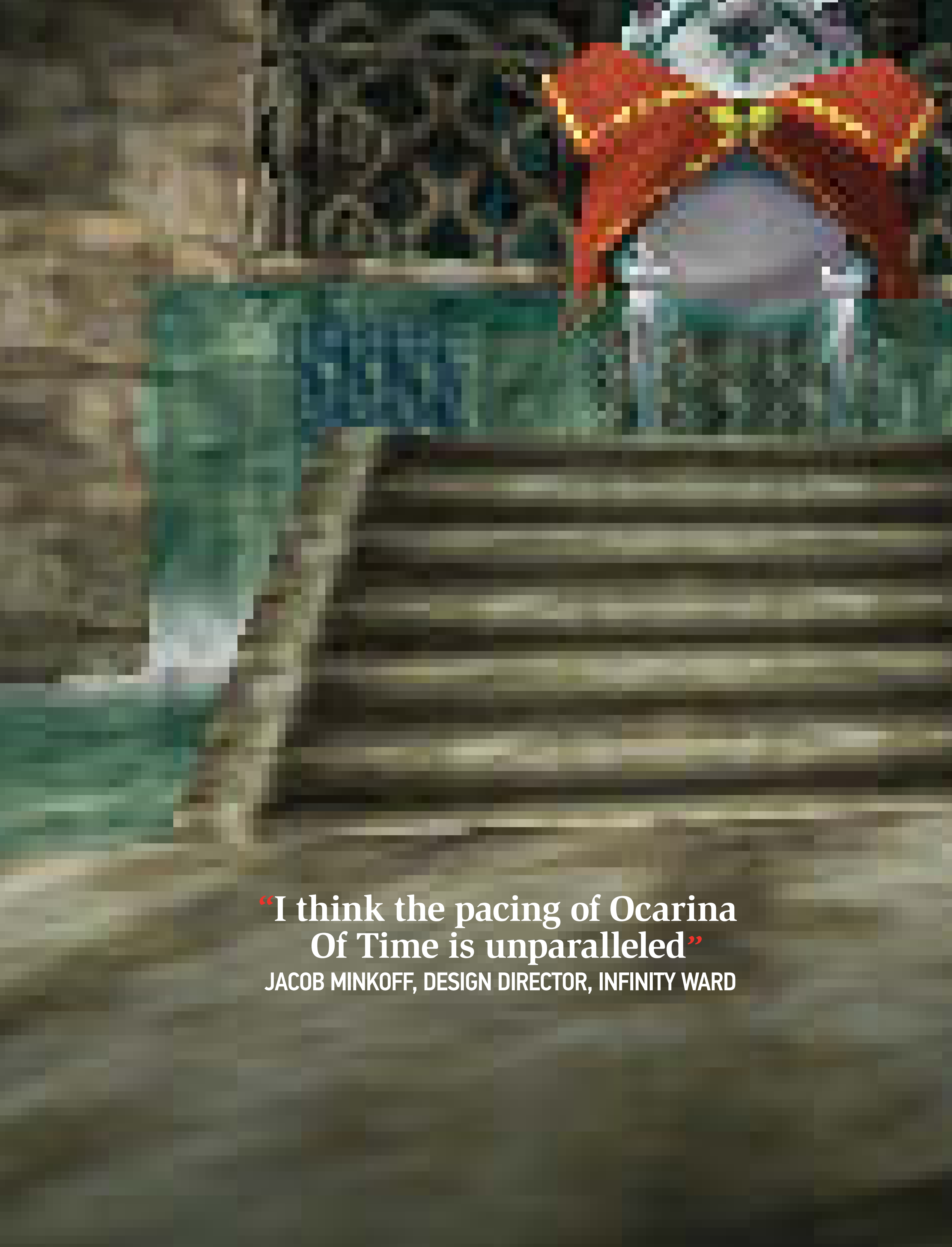
CE2 introduces a campaign of sorts too, where you need to complete certain parameters to score stars and unlock the next maze. It's not entirely essential, and while it offers an enjoyable detour away from the core Score Attack mode, it ultimately represents everything wrong with *CE2*: a series of changes that only serve to dilute a formula that didn't need tweaking.

Above: After popping a Power Pellet, Pac-Man gets to turn the tables on Inky, Pinky, Blinky and Clyde. Build up a big enough train of sleeping ghosts beforehand and you'll be treated to an eye-popping mega munch animation.

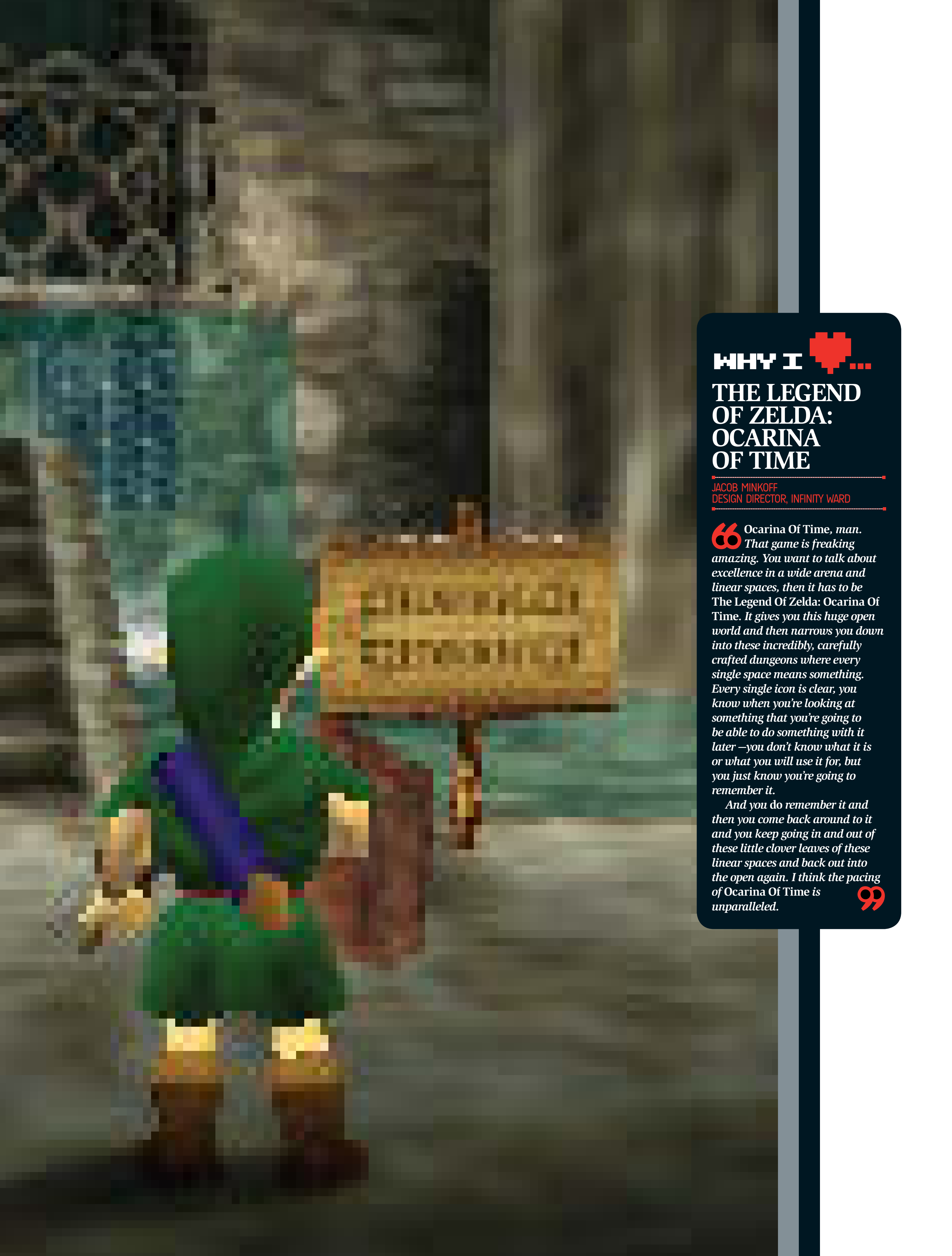


TOO MANY FRUITS SPOIL THE BROTH





> "I think the pacing of Ocarina Of Time is unparalleled"
>
> **JACOB MINKOFF, DESIGN DIRECTOR, INFINITY WARD**



WHY I ♥...

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

JACOB MINKOFF
DESIGN DIRECTOR, INFINITY WARD

“Ocarina Of Time, *man. That game is freaking amazing. You want to talk about excellence in a wide arena and linear spaces, then it has to be* The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time. *It gives you this huge open world and then narrows you down into these incredibly, carefully crafted dungeons where every single space means something. Every single icon is clear, you know when you're looking at something that you're going to be able to do something with it later – you don't know what it is or what you will use it for, but you just know you're going to remember it.*

And you do remember it and then you come back around to it and you keep going in and out of these little clover leaves of these linear spaces and back out into the open again. I think the pacing of Ocarina Of Time *is unparalleled.*”

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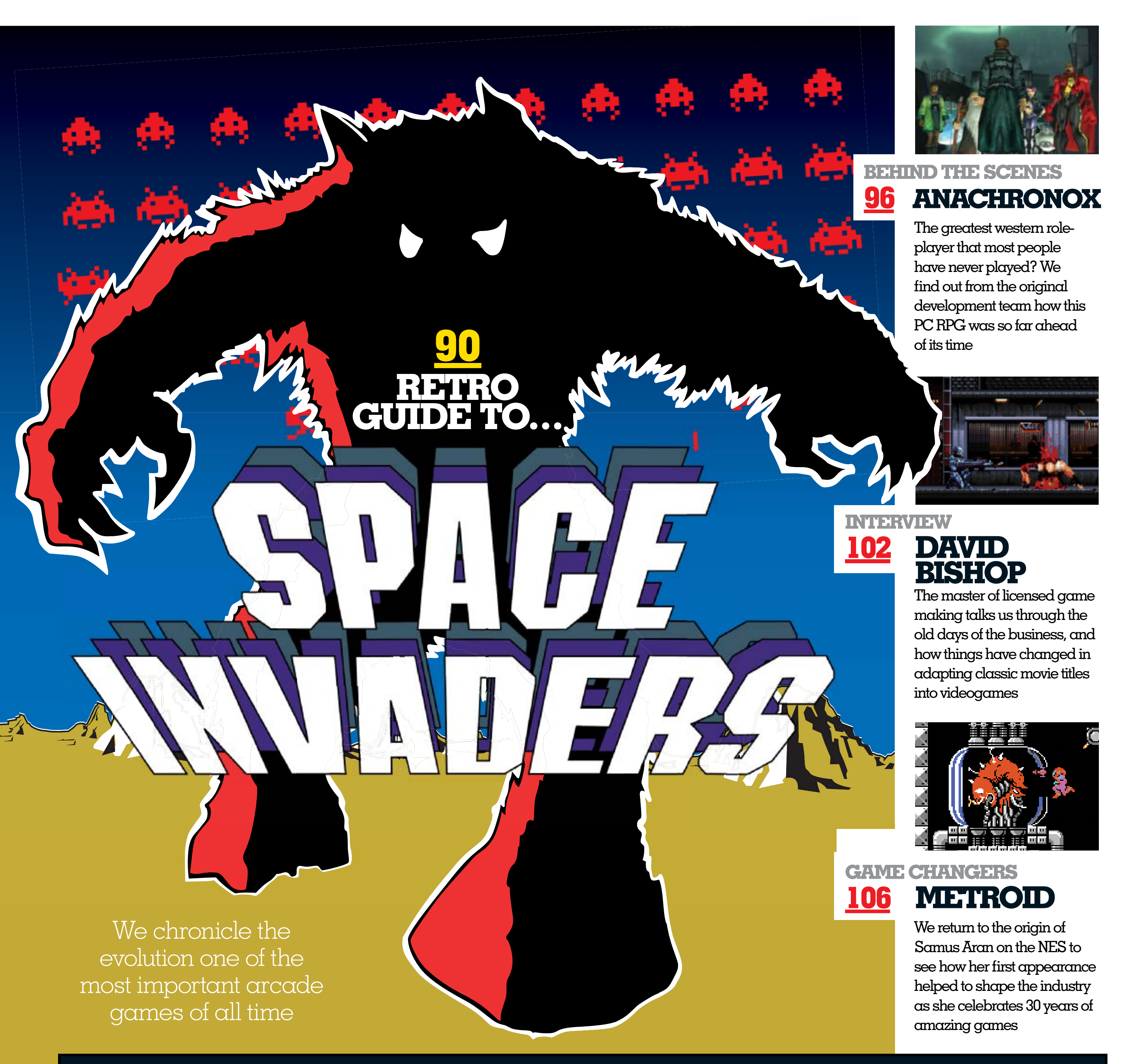


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RETRO

NO.180



We chronicle the evolution one of the most important arcade games of all time

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... SPACE INVADERS

We chronicle the evolution one of the most important arcade games of all time and pick out the best (and worst) titles in its long and illustrious existance

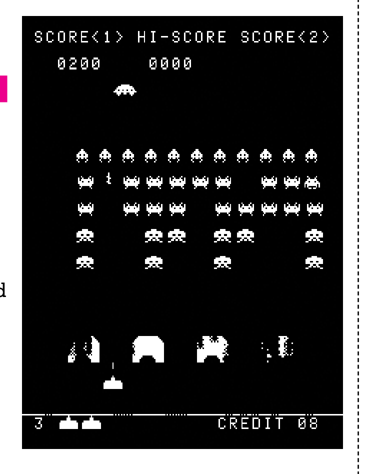
SPACE INVADERS IS one of the most important videogame franchises of all time. It's also one of the most iconic, with the invaders themselves perfectly encapsulating our favourite hobby. While it certainly wasn't the first videogame to appear, it's arguably the first one to have a massive cultural impact – an impact that's still felt to this day.

Space Invaders was created after Tomohiro Nishikado became enthralled with Atari's coin-op *Breakout*, but wanted to create a fresh take on it. He worked on the game for roughly a year, until it was ready for release in 1978, when it became an instant hit. While the rumours of the game creating a national Yen shortage are greatly exaggerated, it still became a huge success for Taito and is arguably one of its most important franchises.

Play *Space Invaders* today and it still grabs you. Yes there are no bells and whistles to it, but defeating that wall of ever-descending aliens becomes strangely hypnotic, while the heartbeat sound that follows their march and increases in speed as the invaders descend remains a brilliant touch. Obviously, when a game becomes as genre-defining and culturally significant as *Space Invaders*, it's inevitable that it will receive all manner of spin-offs, sequels and clones. It would have been impossible to cover them all in just six pages, so we've tried to focus on the most interesting and important ones. How many of them did you play?

SPACE INVADERS 1978

ARCADE, VARIOUS



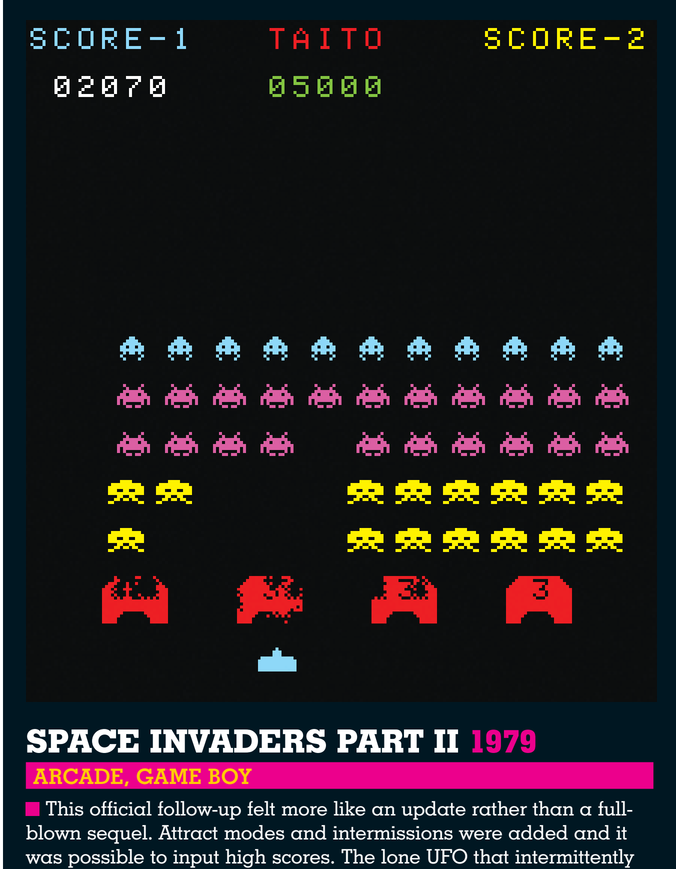
Inspired by *The War Of The Worlds*, Tomohiro Nishikado's *Space Invaders* remains one of the most iconic arcade games of all time, rivalled perhaps only by *Pac-Man*. After witnessing Atari's *Breakout*, Nishikado pondered if the conventional wall could be destroyed by shooting it – it could. The wall became invading aliens (Nishikado considered using humans immoral), the bat became a laser cannon, whilst laser fire replaced the ball found in the original game. *Space Invaders* became a smash hit in arcades and a slew of copycat clones quickly followed. Interestingly, the original Japanese release was a cocktail cabinet featuring black and white graphics. When Midway released the game overseas, it featured a stand-up cabinet and used a technique to reflect the graphics onto the iconic lunar surface many Western gamers will be familiar with. Colour was created using simple strips of cellophane.

SPACE INVADERS 1978

ATARI 2600

As a general rule we're not going to focus on the many home conversions of the various *Space Invaders* games as, firstly, we don't have the space and, secondly, it would give us a headache. We will mention this gem though as it's essentially the industry's first 'killer app' or triple-A release, as they're commonly known today. While the Atari 2600 version of *Space Invaders* wasn't very accurate – it had fewer aliens and bases and looked ugly as hell – it was a phenomenal success, becoming the first ever game on the system to shift over 1 million copies. Despite its basic look, *Space Invaders* was rich in variety thanks to its 112 gameplay modes that featured everything from constantly moving shields, to two players sharing shot and movement duties, as well as invisible aliens.





SPACE INVADERS PART II 1979

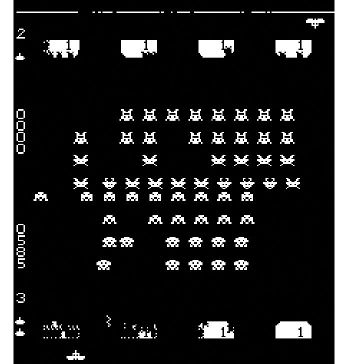
ARCADE, GAME BOY

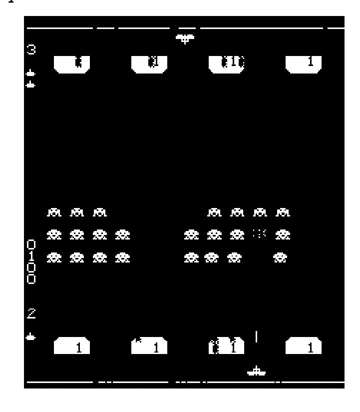
This official follow-up felt more like an update rather than a full-blown sequel. Attract modes and intermissions were added and it was possible to input high scores. The lone UFO that intermittently patrolled the top of the screen was joined by a second, and both would drop invader reinforcements from Stage 3 onwards. Another interesting new mechanic was the introduction of 'Splitter' aliens that would divide into two pulsating 'Breathers' when shot. Oh, and if you're really interested, the cannon made a completely new sound whenever it was fired.

SPACE INVADERS II 1980

ARCADE

This obscure release from Midway is rather brilliant and was only released on cocktail cabinets. Designed for two players, it's a frantic head-to-head battle where you must outscore your opponent. Games play at a hectic pace, as you're trying to not only avoid incoming fire from the invaders above you, but also the attacks of your opponent. While geared towards two players, an even harder single-player version exists too, which removes the aliens from the computer's playing area, making it even easier for them to hit you.





TOMOHIRO NISHIKADO INTERVIEW

Space Invaders' creator looks back at his iconic game

What was the inspiration for *Space Invaders*?
Breakout was really popular in Japan, and I was hooked on it myself. I'd made a few games up until that point, but when I experienced *Breakout* it made me want to drive myself to develop a game that would surpass it.

Why was shooting human enemies dropped?
During the development process, I had the enemy targets set as humans, but Taito's then-president told me to stop using humans in such a way. I initially thought, 'Okay, if I substitute the humans with monster-like creatures, that should work out fine'. But then I saw a newspaper article saying that *Star Wars* had been extremely well received in America, so I decided on using space aliens instead of monsters. *Star Wars* had just hit the theatres in America and was about to be premiered in Japan, so there was a bit of a 'space boom' happening. And that's why I opted to make my game's targets aliens from outer space.

What did you originally style the aliens on?
I took the octopus-like aliens from H G Wells's *The War Of The Worlds* as a starting point, to influence the design of the biggest enemy targets in the game. For the targets in the middle of the screen, I modelled them on the image of a crab, and for the uppermost enemies I was thinking of squids. I was imagining the enemies as marine life. The aliens' movement was basic because of the low memory capacity I had to work with, which meant I could only program two patterns [of movement]. But I felt that in some ways, simple was best.

Did anyone else work on the game with you?
I let a new employee work on the sound source and produce *Space Invaders'* audio effects, but apart from that, all of the other work – namely the planning, the design, graphics design, coding the software, building the hardware – I did entirely by myself.

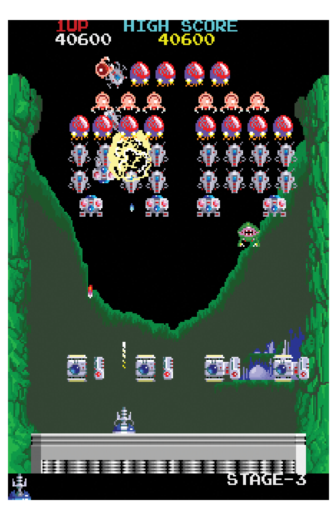
When did you realise you might have a serious hit on your hands?
Once the game was close to being finished, quite a few people from [Taito's] development division were so pleased with it they began to play it regularly. However, because they were playing *Space Invaders* using my tools, I wasn't able to get any work done while they were playing, which bothered me a lot.

Was there really a coin shortage after release?
The effect of *Space Invaders* was certainly noted among businesses using 100-yen coins a lot, but I don't know whether the coins actually became less common because of the game…

RETURN OF THE INVADERS 1985

ARCADE

■ All games have to evolve and stay fresh in order to appeal to new gamers and *Space Invaders* was no different. The block-like iconic aliens of the original game were swapped out for better detailed, but less impactful replacements. The backdrops were greatly improved, too, albeit gaudier than before, while the mothership now dropped three different power-ups upon being hit, which would improve and transform your craft when collected. Oh, and bases would move around, too, making it harder to avoid incoming fire. The aliens were more mobile, dispensing with their standard uniform marching in order to swirl around the screen *Galaga*-style. Destroyed foes would sometimes fall to the ground instead of exploding, adding to the incoming fire that needed to be avoided and a brand new 'Challenge' mode was added.



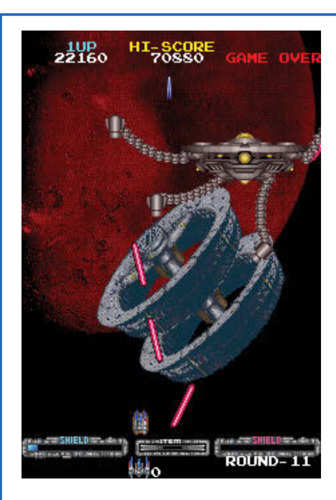




SPACE INVADERS 90 1990

ARCADE

■ This Mega Drive exclusive plays like an enhanced take on an earlier PC Engine release called *Space Invaders Fukkatsu No Hi*. Rounds now consist of two waves; there are no bunkers to hide behind (your ship has a limited number of shields instead) and certain levels feature large craters that alter your direction of fire as you move into them. Some levels even feature asteroids that annoyingly block your shots. The aliens themselves are also more challenging than the ones of old, firing a range of annoying bullets at you, including ones that fire at 45 degree angles. Motherships continue to move along the top of the screen, dropping off useful power-ups, while one even mimics your ship, hurtling to the ground to use a tractor beam on you if you fail to destroy it. While *Space Invaders 90* is an inventive (if ugly) take on the series, it's a little too tough for its own good and it will take some considerable skill (or a fair amount of cheating) to reach its final stage.





SUPER SPACE INVADERS '91 1990

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ Many consider this one of the best games in the series and it's hard to argue otherwise. It's the first *Space Invaders* game to feature bosses, there's an incredible 'Cattle Mutilation' bonus round where you must stop saucers from flying off with grazing cattle, and it's possible for two players to play at the same time. Interestingly, the Japanese version of the game (where it's known as Majestic 12) has a completely different level structure, having a layout akin to the *Darius* games, with multiple routes, which is a lot better than the sequential levels found in the Western version.

MANY CONSIDER THIS ONE OF THE BEST GAMES IN THE SERIES AND IT'S HARD TO ARGUE OTHERWISE

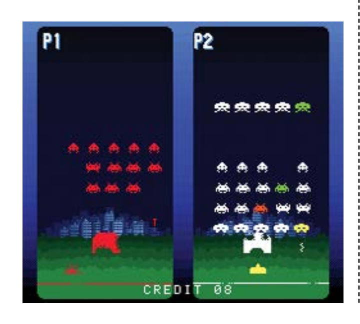
SPACE INVADERS DX 1994

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ Publishers instantly get admonished online nowadays if they release enhanced versions of 'classic' games, but it's actually been happening for years. Take Taito for example, it effectively rereleased *Space Invaders* 16 years after the original game and still managed to get gamers to shove coins into it again.

Its arcade compilation was actually three games in one, with two of them effectively being the 1978 original complete with identical sounds effects and enemy attack patterns. 'Classic' featured the original 1978 game with four different variations of its cabinet, including those old cellophane effects. 'Versus' mode, was designed for two players only and had you trying to outscore your opponent by shooting more enemies. It was fun, but was let down by not being able to play against the computer. The final offering, 'Parody' was just the original game, again, but with brand new sprites from various Taito games, including *Arkanoid*, *Bubble Bobble*, *Rainbow Islands*, *The New Zealand Story*, *Darius* and Don Doko Don.





SPACE INVADERS '95 1995

ARCADE



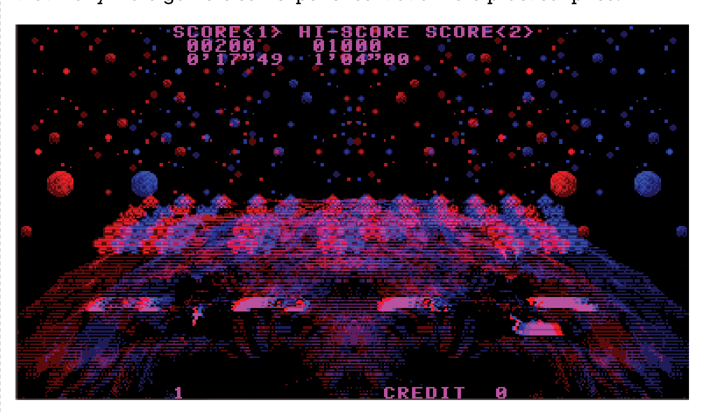
■ After it dabbled with parody in *Space Invaders DX*, Taito went all out for this excellent follow-up. The graphics were brilliant, with insanely cute enemies that looked like they've escaped from a *Parodius* game. There's a selection of different characters to choose from, including an anthropomorphised version of the *Darius* ship, a puppy that fires bones at enemies and even a flying toilet. A new charge attack has been included too, which inevitably slows you down, but can take down a good three enemies on a successful hit.

Not content with being influenced by *Parodius*, Taito's games also has nods to the *Galaga* series, most notably in its hectic bonus rounds that sporadically appeared between stages. There are even scrolling sections, too, although these don't last for too long and movement is still confined across the X axis. The bosses you challenge were just as bizarre as their minions, with one notable example being three of the bosses from the *Darius* series served up on a platter. While no home releases existed at the time, it did appear on *Taito Legends 2* in 2006 for the Xbox and PS2.

SPACE INVADERS VIRTUAL COLLECTION 1995

VIRTUAL BOY

This is quite possibly the rarest home version of *Space Invaders* you can buy, with just the cartridge on its own costing as much as £500. It's not worth that of course, but it is a fun little take on the genre, with some exceptional 3D effects that give a great impression of depth. It's effectively a port of *Space Invaders* and *Space Invaders Part 2*, but it also includes 'Score Attack' and 'Time Attack' modes, the latter of which is surprising fun to play. Here's hoping that Nintendo port Virtual Boy games to the 3DS so that many more gamers can experience it at a more practical price.



MORE TO LOOK OUT FOR

- PEPSI INVADERS, ATARI 2600, 1983
- MININVADERS, ARCADE, 1990
- SPACE INVADERS: FUKKATSU NO HI, PC ENGINE, 1990
- PD ULTRAMAN INVADERS, PLAYSTATION, 1995
- SPACE INVADERS, COLOR FX, 1999
- SPACE INVADERS ANNIVERSARY, ARCADE, 2003
- SPACE INVADERS POCKET, PSP, 2005
- SPACE INVADERS EXTREME 2, DS, 2009
- SPACE INVADERS: THE BEAT ATTACKER, ARCADE, 2008

SPACE INVADERS 1999

VARIOUS

Although it hasn't had as many significant makeovers as *Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders* has been no slouch either, and Taito has constantly reinvented the series over the years. This impressive effort from 1999 was released on a variety of systems, and has everything you'd want from a modern *Space Invaders* game.

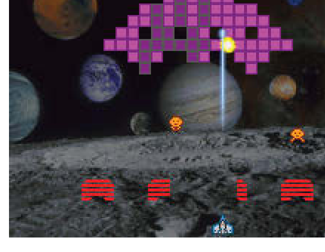
Space Invaders has the player defending attacks from each planet in the solar system and introduces a large number of different enemies, with grant useful secondary ship attacks if four enemies of the same type are destroyed. Some weapons fire vertically to the left and right, instantly wiping out a row of enemies, while others send out spreads of deadly missiles. It's a novel spin on the formula, but also requires a fair degree of thought to use, as later levels cunningly mix up the rows of attacking aliens, which makes it harder to gain those useful power-ups and almost turns the shooter into a puzzle game. Bases return, and can be shunted with laser fire to destroy any enemies that hit them (they can absorb three such collisions), while a large number of bosses feature too, many of which have inventive and challenging attack patterns.

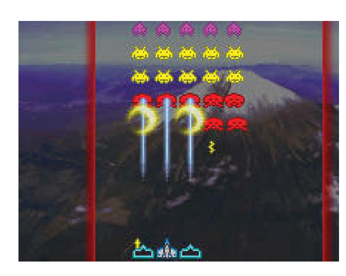


SPACE INVADERS: INVASION DAY 2002

GAMECUBE, PS2

Taito has made some bizarre decisions with *Space Invaders*, and this weak effort is a prime example. It's a third-person based cover shooter and has you hiding behind barrels and other urban items while avoiding the incoming attacks of the invaders. Not only does it look incredibly ugly and unimaginative, but the controls are exceptionally clunky, which makes it a real pig to avoid incoming enemies. The weapons you have access to are incredibly weak and pitiful, meaning it takes ages to kill the huge bosses that appear. Fortunately, the game's 'Story' mode only takes an hour or so to complete, meaning you can get stuck into the far superior 'Survival' mode. It greatly transforms how you play the game, adding a two-player mode and wiping away the continues that made the main game such a breeze to play through. Oh and the original game is hidden away to find, too.



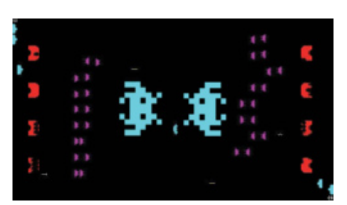


SPACE INVADERS REVOLUTION 2005

DS

Although not quite as revolutionary as its name suggests, the first *Space Invaders* game for DS wasn't a bad effort. Overseen by original creator, Tomohiro Nishikado, it includes a reasonably faithful port of the original coin-op classic, as well as a brand new mode called 'New Era'. It's a fun take on the traditional formula, with battles taking place against 20 recognisable geographical locations, including Africa and North America. There were a total of 13 different enemies, and a vast array of different power-ups to use. Touch screen support is available for certain attacks, but it feels like a missed opportunity, the lack of a multiplayer mode of any description also disappoints.





SPACE INVADERS EVOLUTION 2005

PSP

Many classic Taito franchises found fresh life on portable systems like the PSP and the DS, including *Bubble Bobble*, *Rainbow Islands* and *The New Zealand Story*. *Space Invaders* was no different, but its releases were hit and miss. This excretion from Marvelous Entertainment was particularly offensive, being a compilation of three different games. There's a weak, miserable port of the arcade original, a slightly better take on Midway's competitive game that requires two players to hold different ends of the PSP to play and an all-new 3D mode with rhythm action elements (the game was known as *Space Invaders: Galaxy Beat* in Japan). The 3D game is quite simply terrible, shoehorning two popular genres together and coming up with a chaotic mess that does neither any favours. A classic example of how not to revitalise an iconic game.

CLONED INVADERS

Who needs an official licence, eh?



SUPER INVADERS

SYSTEM: BBC MICRO

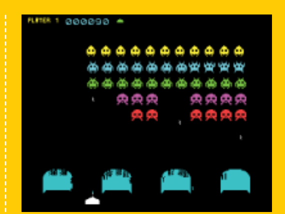
This impressive effort was released in 1982 and utilises the BEEB's high resolution mode. It's a very authentic port from Acornsoft.



SPECTRAL INVADERS

SYSTEM: ZX SPECTRUM

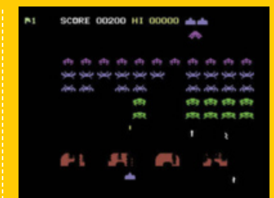
It's a little more garish than the arcade original, but this Bug-Byte published effort was the perfect way to play *Space Invaders* on the Speccy.



INVADERS

SYSTEM: ZX SPECTRUM

This offering from Artic Computing looked even better than Bug-Byte's effort thanks to some very authentic looking invaders that came very close to the arcade originals.



AVENGER

SYSTEM: COMMODORE 64

Although it also appeared on the Vic-20, the Commodore 64 version is far superior. In fact, it's one of the best 8-bit representations we've played.



CLASSIC INVADERS

SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC

Bubble Bus' interpretation is super-fast and rather gaudy to boot. It's notable for the fact the invaders explode upon being hit.

SPACE INVADERS EXTREME 2008

DS, PSP, XBOX LIVE

Bonkers is the best way to describe this psychedelic take on Taito's venerable franchise. It follows the standard formula of earlier games, but greatly varies enemy formations and adds stressful boss fights. There are numerous invaders with different abilities, whose power-ups can be acquired if you shoot four enemies of the same type in succession. High score bonuses can be awarded by shooting specific colours or types of enemies and it all plays out to an excellent electronic score. The later Xbox Live version added 4-player co-op as well as a background visualiser created by Jeff Minter. A sequel appeared in 2009.



SPACE INVADERS GET EVEN 2008

WII

This novel take on the franchise put the player in control of the alien forces for a change. Gameplay is time-based and sees you guiding your UFO around the 3D worlds, looking for suitable settlements and enemy forces to destroy. Once found, you simply directed your alien invaders (depicted in the classic 2D shapes of the original game) to take out the opposing forces. The aliens themselves have five different attack formations to utilise, further adding to your strategy, while defeated buildings and enemy forces add to your dwindling time supply.

Sadly, the starter pack only consists of one stage, with Taito requiring you to spend additional cash to unlock the remaining six stages. Very sneaky, but it was the only way of getting access to ships from *Darius* and *Rayforce*, two other popular Taito shooting franchises.

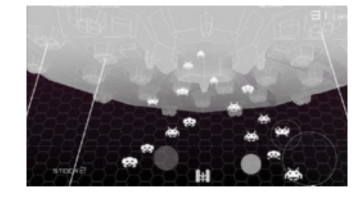


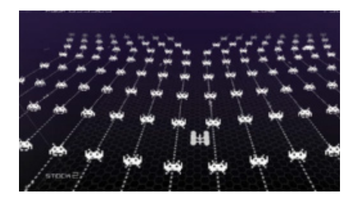


SPACE INVADERS INFINITY GENE 2009

IOS

Originally released on mobile phones in Japan, this excellent shooter found a huge audience on iOS, before moving to Xbox Live and Android. It's a magnificent shooter that starts off as a reproduction of the original game. As play progresses you unlock genes, which grant you numerous different abilities, from moving up and down, to all sorts of outrageous weapons. It's a brilliant concept that's further enhanced by some genuinely great gameplay modes, including one brilliant offering that generates new levels based on the music on your device.





IN THE GENES

Reisuke Ishida talks Space Invaders and Infinity Gene



Can you recall the first time you saw *Space Invaders*? How old were you and what was your impression of it?
I was a little too young to experience the *Space Invaders* boom first-hand. I'm not sure when I first became aware of the game, but I was probably around four or five years old. My neighbourhood didn't have an arcade – I only knew the game from TV – but the unique pixel artwork strongly appealed to me. I didn't have a chance to play the game until I was around 11 years old, playing with my friend's Famicom [NES] version. Rather than anything specific to the gameplay itself, my primary thought at the time was 'So this is *Space Invaders*!'

Is it true *Infinity Gene* came about as a result of an internal challenge at Taito to come up with a way of rejuvenating *Space Invaders* for its 30th anniversary?
While it's true there were plans to release a 30th anniversary game, I don't remember it being an open call for designs. My boss asked me directly if I was interested, and when I said I was, he told to me to submit an idea. His recollection of the conversation is hazy, though, so it's possible that other people were invited to participate as well. While I was working on *Space Invaders Infinity Gene*, the console division was independently working on *Space Invaders Extreme*, so I took special care to make my project as different as possible.

***Infinity Gene* was well received by fans. How happy were you with the finished game and its reception?**
With every game there are always some things I wish I could have done differently, but it seems like the themes I hoped to get across with *Space Invaders Infinity Gene* were successfully communicated to the players, so I'm extremely satisfied.

How does it feel to have been involved in a series so popular and revered?
Space Invaders was the very first videogame I had ever seen, so when I was a child *Space Invaders* came to symbolise videogames and videogame culture as a whole. I've gone on to play a wide variety of videogames since then, but *Space Invaders'* position as a symbol of gaming has only become stronger. It's the king of games.

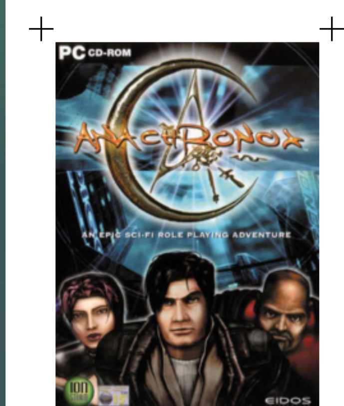
Space Invaders Infinity Gene is the crystallisation of my thoughts and feelings about *Space Invaders* and its monumental role in gaming history. The fact that I was able to release an official successor to *Space Invaders* is a tremendous honour and source of pride for me.



BEHIND THE SCENES

ANACHRONOX

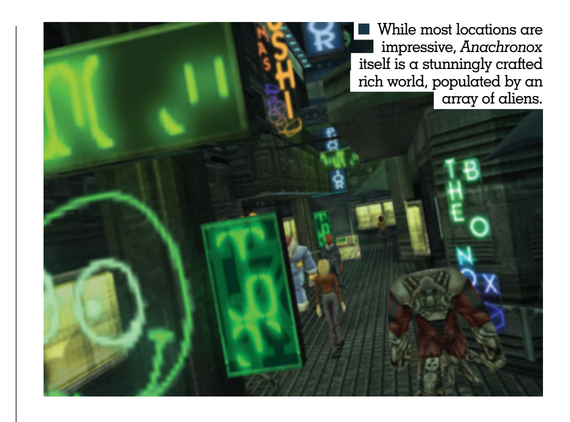
The minds behind Ion Storm Dallas take us through their most ambitious project, Anachronox. Unique, grand in scope and ahead of its time, it's the best western RPG you've never played



Released: 2001
Format: PC
Publisher: Eidos
Key Staff: Tom A. Hall (Project Lead), Jakes Hughes (Producer/Cinematic Director), Lee Perry (Lead Artist)

IN MAY 2001 ION STORM DALLAS CLOSED ITS DOORS. Founded in 1995 by id Software giants John Romero and Tom A. Hall, the gaming world watched Ion Storm's every move with great interest. After all, these were the guys who created *Doom*, *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Commander Keen*, so nothing short of a masterpiece was unfairly expected from them with each passing game. However, with hype reaching fever pitch during the development for *Daikatana*, culminating with that infamous magazine ad which read "John Romero's about to make you his bitch", the gaming world was shattered when *Daikatana* didn't exactly turn out to be quite so revolutionary. After a lengthy development cycle and a PR campaign that almost painted it like the second coming of the First-Person Shooter genre itself, John Romero's *Daikatana* was, in many respects, deemed a failure. Ion Storm Dallas has largely been remembered as the company that brought us *Daikatana*, but the other game that was in development in tandem with Romero's time travel FPS was *Anachronox*, a game that was more ambitious and inventive than *Daikatana* could have ever dreamed of being.

When starting Ion Storm, Tom had the opportunity to make any game he wanted, as to did Romero, which led to *Diakatana*. So, with a deep love for the likes of the *Final Fantasy* series as well as *Chrono Trigger*, Tom's aim was to create a "Western-translated" JRPG . Pepper in an additional appreciation for classic adventure games and you have *Anachronox*; Ion Storm Dallas' most impressive outing. The name *Anachronox* came to Tom's mind while, out of all places, he was in the bathroom. As Tom, Project Lead on *Anachronox*, puts it, "It just appeared. I wrote it down, then I wondered what it was. It was sort of a combination of "noxious" and "anachronism". So "poisonous" and "a thing out of its own time period" which I sort of smooshed into meaning "poison from the past". So that was what the whole overall plot was, but also what was true for each character - they each had a poison from their past that they need to heal."



While most locations are impressive, *Anachronox* itself is a stunningly crafted rich world, populated by an array of aliens.

WE WOULD END UP HANDING A WHOLE SECTION OF THE GAME TO ONE OR TWO PEOPLE AND GIVING THEM A LOT OF CREATIVE ROOM TO WORK IN

Envisioned as "a rollicking, epic, fun-and-serious take on the multi-character RPG" by Tom, the game starts off on the artificial planet known as *Anachronox*. The planet, believed to have been created by an ancient alien race as a quarantine zone, is home to main protagonist Sylvester "Sly" Boots, a lowly private investigator who hasn't had any business in quite some time. Boots soon crosses paths with Grumpos Matavastros, an eccentric scholar who is obsessed with MysTech. MysTech is essentially a stand in for magic in the world of *Anachronox*. After a powerful piece of MysTech falls into the hands of Detta, a feared gangster that has it out for Boots, both Boots and Grumpos set off on a mission to unlock the secrets behind MysTech and save the world, visiting various planets and building upon their team along the way. With a story that covers everything from humour, drama to action, *Anachronox* is an unusual beast of a game. Containing a number of explorable worlds, numerous different alien races to interact with and hints of an extended universe which may even dabble in the multi-verse, the game is impressively daring in scope.

Keeping Tom's influences in mind, *Anachronox* is a third person adventure that focuses its gameplay on exploration, character and environmental interaction and, like any self respecting Western JRPG, battling enemies. The battle system of *Anachronox* plays out almost identically to *Final Fantasy*'s Active Time Battle system, as it allows each character on screen to take a turn one by one. From standard physical attacks, an array of MysTech attacks to a number of unique character moves called BattleSkills, battling is both familiar yet refreshing. This is mostly down to the fact that the player



The game begins with our hero Sylvester "Sly" Boots down on his luck with a black eye and an empty wallet.

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Anachronox's emotional centrepiece is heartbreaking, but also your cursor

WHILE THE VAST majority of *Anachronox* firmly plants itself in the arena of humour and action, it does have moments that are heartfelt and touching. The character that plays on this at times is Fatima Doohan, played wonderfully by Jenni Tooley. She is the voice of reason throughout the game, but she's a character with a rather shocking back story. As revealed in a flashback, Fatima was killed when Boots lost control of his flying car while in hot pursuit after the gangster Detta. The scene adds an extra dimension to both Boots and Fatima, and we can only assume that it would have been delved into more in the ill fated sequel.

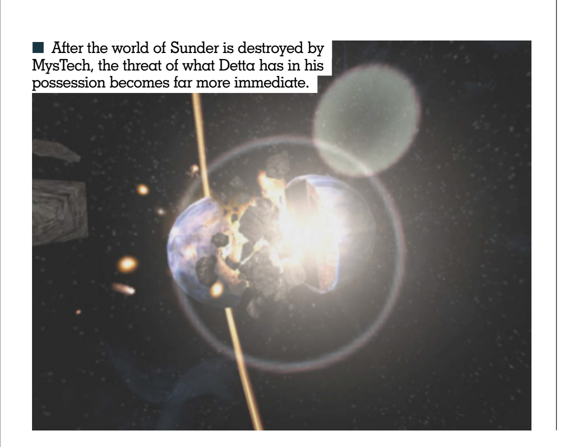
With Fatima dead and Boots in a deep depression, he paid to have her revived within a LifeCursor. During gameplay, the player effectively uses the LifeCursor like a typical cursor from a point-and-click adventure, mainly using it to navigate and interact with characters and the environment. The relationship of Boots and Fatima is strangely moving and is expanded upon a little later into the game. As Tom says, "We managed to have a dang hilarious game while still delivering moments of awe, terror, drama, and deep emotion. When the flashback to what happened to Fatima played out and I watched it for the first time, I cried. Like, say, *Six Feet Under*, when you spend so much time with characters in a game or in a show, the emotions of their truth and resolution can be powerful. Can videogames make you cry? You're damned right they can."

It may not serve as an emotional anchor throughout the entire game, but Ion Storm Dallas gives the player just enough information to start asking questions about what secrets other characters may have, or as Jake puts it, "poison from their past".

can freely move throughout the battlefield, though moving one step will use up a character's turn in battle. This can be used in a number of strategic ways, but it truly comes into play during the boss battles strewn across the game. It's during these battles in which navigating the battlefield isn't just a way of dispatching your foes faster and avoiding attacks, but rather simply a means of survival. This is imperative during the final boss battle, as without moving around the battle field during that fight, the boss is otherwise unbeatable. Despite *Anachronox* blending together a slew of different genres and styles, it surprisingly appeals to both the hardcore and casual gamer. In speaking about this, Tom says, "Well, you could skate along the surface, or dive into the depth. With tons of extra things to find, mini-games to play, MysTech and character combos to optimise, there certainly is *lots* to do. But getting through is really the only thing you have to do. So either RPG Lite+Adventure game can be your experience, or min-maxing and finding every collectable can also be done." It is this approach to the gameplay that, even today, seems to pull in gamers regardless of level of skill.

WE CREATED A LOT (AND YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW MUCH OF AN UNDERSTATEMENT THAT IS!) OF UNUSED CONTENT

At its heart *Anachronox* puts much of its focus on its wonderfully rich cast. Featuring a cast of eight main characters, which includes the alcoholic failed superhero Paco, the wise cracking robot PAL-18 and Democratus, a character that is also a planet which can also be landed on and explored, *Anachronox*'s cast are a bizarre bunch to say the least. In crafting the main and extended cast of characters in the game, Tom says, "Well, the main characters I developed as the deeper, non-traditional people with something dark in their past, and not cookie-cutter checkboxes. Then we talked through characters in every locale, and Richard Gaubert wrote 800 pages of the funniest and/or deepest dialogue. I started and maintained the tone of the universe and


After the world of Sunder is destroyed by MysTech, the threat of what Detta has in his possession becomes far more immediate.


At one point during *Anachronox*, Stiletto fights and kills a tribe of what are essentially Ewoks. It's basically payback.




GAMESPOT PC PS4 Xbox One Wii U Reviews News

Anachronox Review

Anachronox is a solid addition to the genre and makes up for some rough spots with a welcome sense of humor and a lot of personality.

Japanese role-playing games are a staple of console gaming. But aside from some lackluster ports, they've been almost nonexistent on the PC. Developer Ion Storm is attempting to redress this imbalance with Anachronox, a Final Fantasy-inspired game designed specifically for the PC. It manages to stay true to its console roots while modifying the formula in a few key areas, not the least of which is the addition of plot and dialogue not translated from Japanese. Though these changes are too subtle to bridge the gap between people who enjoy this type of linear adventure-RPG hybrid and those who don't, Anachronox is a solid addition to the genre and makes up for some rough spots with a welcome sense of humor and a lot of personality.

However, there is one major caveat. The game gets off to a slow start. Though the convention in this genre is to keep you on rails for a while before opening up, Anachronox is a little ridiculous in this respect. The first five or six hours involve lots and lots of running mindless errands without much in the way of combat, puzzle solving, or anything else that could be considered good gameplay to break up the monotony. You'll generally be asked to walk somewhere, get something, or talk to somebody, and walk back. In most cases, this involves two or three transitions between

If you have the patience to make it through the slow start, Anachronox will reward you with great dialogue, great voice acting, and an increasingly complex fighting system

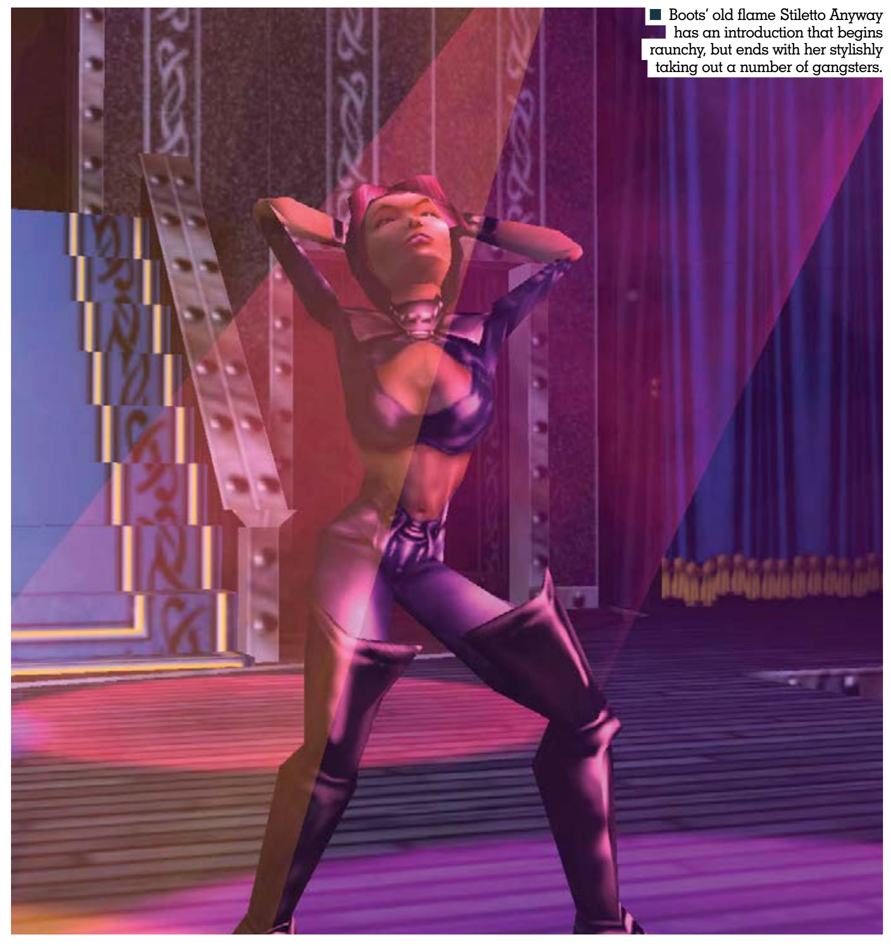
Gamespot, 2001

■ In one of the games more bizarre moments, Boots and his team face off against a super villain and his crew of miniature masked cronies.

the main characters, while Jake Hughes and Richard Gaubert breathed life into them and the whole hilarious coterie of minor characters." Jake Hughes, Producer and Cinematic Director, echoes Tom's comments regarding the lure of the cast's complicated pasts in saying, "It's that we are all flawed. *Anachronox* literally means: poison from the past. All of our characters have some poison from their past. We can relate to that because we all have a poison from the past, and if you don't, you are doing it wrong. We can relate to people who are messed up and dealing with emotional issues. The hope is that we can get over them. I'm still working out some of my own!"

One of *Anachronx*'s most appealing elements is its visuals, which gives its environments quite a varied and unique look. This desire for *Anachronox*'s different visuals came from the fact that the team did not want the game to look like it was made with the Quake II engine, and as Lee Perry, Lead Artist on *Anachronox* says, he directly avoided a "first person construction mindset". According to Jake, Tom had the look of the world crystal clear in his mind prior to development. In talking about *Anachronox*'s starting environment, Jake comments, "Tom had such a clear idea of the Bricks, and Seneca Menard built it… which the team couldn't believe the amount of work he did by himself. And we kind of forced the player to hang out there for about eight hours of gameplay. And mixing sound and music, NPCs walking about, the ships flying round, the voice from the sky announcing the shifting plates…. the atmosphere, you really got a sense of the Bricks, so by the time you got off the planet, you were so ready to explore the new worlds out there. I felt like the game had such a confidence. Trust us, come along with us for the ride!".

In terms of designing and crafting the environments, the game boasted a number of worlds, with each one



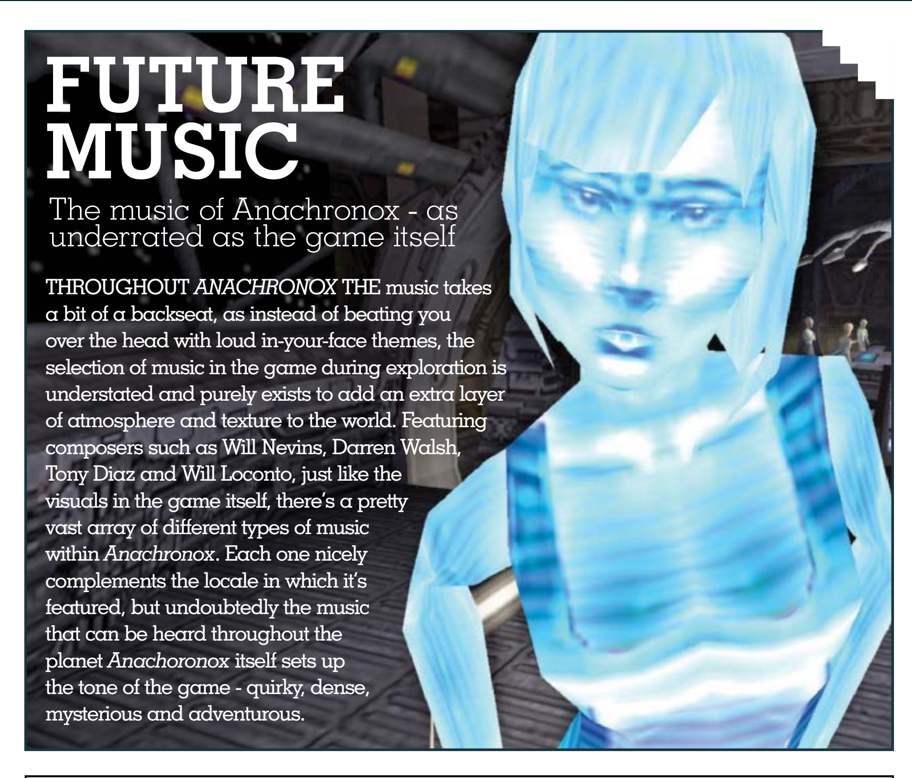
■ Boots' old flame Stiletto Anyway has an introduction that begins raunchy, but ends with her stylishly taking out a number of gangsters.

looking completely different than what came before it. From *Anachronox* itself that looks like a cross between the neon soaked streets of *Blade Runner* and a gritty back alley from Hong Kong in *Deus Ex*, to Whitendon on the planet of Democratus, that is clearly a Dickens inspired Victorian era location, *Anachronox* is brimming full of environmental diversity. Fresh off the heels from a stint at Squaresoft, Lee wanted to give the game "densely packed urban environments, and prepared battle stages". In speaking about the challenge of breathing life into the world of *Anachronox*, Lee says, "It really came down to the individual people working on each area. The game was really large in scope (comically over-scoped in retrospect!), but there are advantages to that. We had so many environments and characters to create, there wasn't a lot of time for hand holding people through the process. We would end up handing a whole section of the game to one or two people and giving them a lot of creative room to work in. This let each of the areas have a really different feel to them structurally, and people took a lot of pride making their areas feel as lived in as possible."

However, Lee is keen to also credit the rest of the development team when it comes to *Anachronox*'s overall visual flair. As he says, "Many of the characters were textured by Lee Dotson, so even when we had areas being fleshed out by people, so much content ran through that one artist that it definitely helped to unify the style. Similarly, Seneca Menard was responsible for some impressive stretches of the game, building levels, characters, scripting, etc… so it was really clear which areas had people's thumb-prints in them." Ultimately, Lee and the team were massively successful, as one of *Anachronox*'s biggest takeaways was its tactile and lived in locations, that were successful as both explorable locations as well as battlefields to fight foes on.

Jake directed the cut-scenes using a program created by Programmer Joey Liaw, and it proved to be a powerful and versatile tool. Jake describes one fan favourite cut-scene and how it was crafted in saying, "The drifting in space scene as an example: Tom had set up this great moment where we had the characters stuck together with no hope of rescue. We knew that this was the first time we could have a scene where we take a break from moving the story forward and just spend a little time with our characters. Now, I had the Cine editor at my machine at home and like many, many, *many* nights, Richard Gaubert would come over (as he lived in the apartment downstairs) and we would workshop scenes. I had the space shuttle level up on my machine, and we pulled off this gag where we moved the camera in sync with a rotating sky. The illusion made it seem like the shuttle was drifting in space, where in fact the shuttle wasn't moving, and then the camera then moves right into the shuttle through the window to end up on Rho. The shot





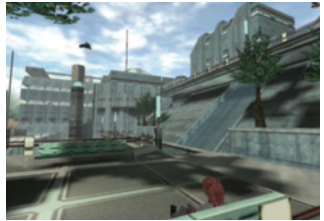
FUTURE MUSIC

The music of Anachronox - as underrated as the game itself

THROUGHOUT *ANACHRONOX* THE music takes a bit of a backseat, as instead of beating you over the head with loud in-your-face themes, the selection of music in the game during exploration is understated and purely exists to add an extra layer of atmosphere and texture to the world. Featuring composers such as Will Nevins, Darren Walsh, Tony Diaz and Will Loconto, just like the visuals in the game itself, there's a pretty vast array of different types of music within *Anachronox*. Each one nicely complements the locale in which it's featured, but undoubtedly the music that can be heard throughout the planet *Anachoronox* itself sets up the tone of the game - quirky, dense, mysterious and adventurous.

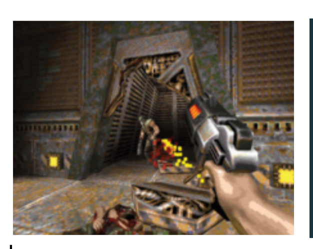
I WOULD DEFINITELY WANT TO BE IN CONTROL OF THE SEQUEL



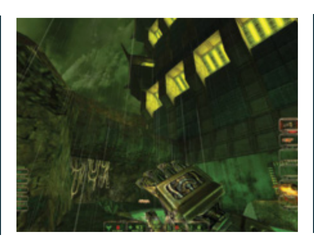


> A GAMING EVOLUTION

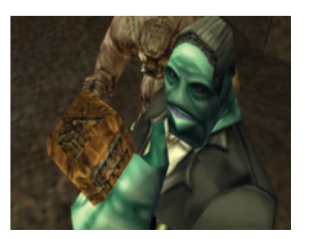
Quake 2 > Diakatana > Anachronox



Quake II - Developed by John Carmack, John Cash and Brian Hook, the Quake II Engine (also known as id Tech 2) was a popular choice for FPS games around the time.

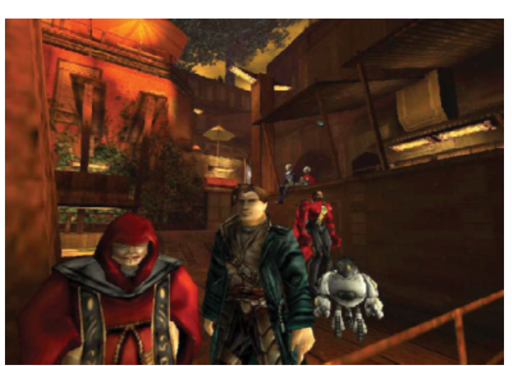


Diakatana - After failing to impress the crowd at E3 1997 with footage using the then-outdated original Quake Engine, Ion Storm moved *Diakatana* to the Quake II Engine.



was a particular length to create the mood of the shuttle drifting, so Rich wrote dialogue to that shot and we timed it perfectly to the camera move. Then he came up with these little moments between the different characters. We made a lot of custom animations for this scene, which means we knew this scene was important. Part of the importance of that scene was to also make it funny. And this is where Rich and Tom's influence is so strong. A lot of folks had said that the drifting in space scene was their favourite, and it was a learning lesson for me, as it showed that people weren't just interested in plot, as they wanted to spend time with our characters. And to be honest, I think a lot of us on the team would like to spend more time with them."

Much like *Diakatana*, *Anachronox*'s development cycle was incredibly long, as when it hit the shelves in June 2001 (one month after Ion Storm Dallas shut down) it had been in development for four and a half years. The team as a whole feels indebted to Eidos for sticking alongside them for so long, but even after those four and a half years of development, *Anachronox* had to be essentially cut in half. There came a point during development where a realisation came over the team that Tom's original story plan was far too vast for one game. Prior to development, Tom literally created a universe map to the world of *Anachronox*. As he describes, his original plan for *Anachronox* had "Dozens of star systems, planets, 400 creatures, and such. And the story I laid out was beyond epic. So at a certain point, Jake and Rich came to me and said this was too big to tell, and that made the stopping point heart-breakingly obvious (sorry folks)! But the concept of *Anachronox* was made (a riff of Frederik Pohl's *Gateway*) so it could possibly grow into an MMO, which was a fairly new thing, *Ultima Online* having come out around the start of our development efforts. I wanted a universe that all sorts of games could live in." Furthermore, according to Lee, "We created a lot (and you don't understand how much of an understatement that is!) of unused content". This included the planet of Matrix 0, the homeworld of PAL-18, Boots' plucky robo-sidekick. As Tom planned, on this mostly created but unused world, "the crew doesn't have any of the planet's currency, so they are essentially poor, and they get stuck in rectangular solids with their picture pasted on them! They gradually earn the Matrix 0 currency, getting more polygons, some animations, attachment points, specular maps, and get on to meeting more important, more well-rendered people they need help from!". This, on top of a pirate-themed world called Port Presence that was completely in black and white, was one of the many ideas and concepts that never made the final cut. Instead the game ends on what was originally planned to be the halfway point, which was a superb story twist that would shame M Night Shyamalan.





Visually, Whitendon is both impressive in terms of design as well as how utterly alien it looks compared to the rest of the game.

REVIEWED ON PC · 18 JUL 2001

ANACHRONOX

Share. Ion Storm delivers one of the best American console-style RPGs yet, but it looks a little dated.

BY IGN STAFF + For the last few years, RPGs have been segregated into two categories: the traditional "American" PC RPG, and the console-style games coming out of Japan. American PC RPGs generally followed more pen-and-paper routes with less a linear and freer form adventure. On the other hand, Japanese console RPGs tend to be more of interactive stories with much more linear adventures due to the stronger focus on the narrative flow.

While console RPGs out of Japan have always excelled, and American RPGs on the PC were always the top in their genre, there has really never been an American made console-style RPG that could truly hold its own against the work coming out of Japan. Until Anachronox. This sci-fi adventure is one of the first RPGs from an American developer that successfully follows the style set by traditional console RPGs, even if it is on the PC.

Anachronox tells the story of, well, Anachronox. The strange name applies to a giant floating artificial world that lends its name to the title of the adventure, even though the game simply uses the planet as a springboard to larger things (such as, say, saving the entire universe). Your main character is Sylvester "Sly" Boots, who has a striking resemblance to the former IGN PC tyrant, Trent Ward. Sly starts off on his own (aside from his holographic companion who gives you tips from time to time), in debt, and simply looking for a way off the floating artificial rock that he reluctantly is calling home for the time being.



Finally, an American developer has created a console inspired RPG that isn't destined for the bargain bin within a week

IGN, 2001

Ultimately with the closure of Ion Storm Dallas a continuation of *Anachronox* never materialised. However, with the rise of websites like Kickstarter, there's an ever growing movement of fans that want to see what is next in store for Boots and his gang. On whether a sequel could happen, Tom remarks, "Well, really, it cost millions and just had five ads in magazines at the time. So many people have come up to me and said, "Where was this? I didn't know about it, and it's so awesome!" But since it is a cult classic, it might be difficult to fund a proper sequel. Although, yes, if that were possible, I'd love to do it of course! I would *definitely* want to be in control of the sequel. And yes, I have mapped out exactly what happens next and how this arc of the story will end. But there are so many to tell in this universe."

Whether a continuation happens or not, the team that created *Anachronox* still remain close to this day, as every year at GDC they still meet up for dinner. While Ion Storm Austin was a little more financially successful, which was kicked off by the legendary *Deus Ex* under the gaze of Warren Spector, Ion Storm Dallas never really gets the credit it deserves. With *Diakatana*'s development, PR and release overshadowing the company as a whole, *Anachronox* was released to a lukewarm financial response. However, looking back *Anachronox* may not only be Ion Storm Dallas' best outing, but it's also one that can stand shoulder to shoulder with *Deus Ex* in terms of innovation, daring and, above all else, genuine passion on the part of its incredible development team. We may never see what's beyond that gate at the climax of the game, but we'll always have the unforgettable adventure that began with its hero being brutalised by a comically short suited thug, getting hurled out of a pane glass window, tumbling through the air, landing hard on the metal ground, only to pull up a stool at the local bar a mere five paces away, look at the bartender and say "Hit me". Unforgettable indeed.



INTERVIEW

DAVID BISHOP

From Cool Spot and Aladdin to Deal Or No Deal and Cartoon Network, David Bishop has worked on an array of licensed games. We talk to him about his career, and how licensed game development has changed over the years.

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Dune (1992)
Producer



RoboCop Versus The Terminator (1993)
Director of design



Disney's The Jungle Book (1994)
Game designer

LICENSED GAMES HAVE had a tumultuous history, to say the least. From the early days of movie studios investing into the industry – and causing its collapse, famously thanks to the likes of Atari's *E.T.* – through the golden age during the Mega Drive and SNES era and onwards into the rise (or perhaps fall, in this case) of licensed mobile games. David Bishop has done it all, beginning at a time when licensed investment was at its highest and eventually across myriad platforms. There are few people in the games industry as knowledgeable about licensed games, so we caught up with the veteran developer to find out more about the heady days of licensed game development…

How did you first get into licensed videogame development?

So, when I joined Virgin – which was back in 1987 or something – I got hired by a guy called Nick Alexander. My first day I went to his office and he introduced me to my boss – a guy called Frank Herman. Frank was like this no-nonsense guy, quite scary actually, before you got to know him. So I went into his office and before I could even shake his hand he threw a copy of the book *Dune* at me. And it's a big book, luckily it was softback and luckily I managed to catch it. And basically the first words he said to me were 'here, go and make a game of this'. That was my first introduction to my boss, who would be my boss for many years and became a really good friend. Luckily I'd actually read the book as part of my English Literature O Level. And so I'd already read the book and some of the other *Dune* books and loved them. So I re-read the book – and that was a challenge, it's like 550 pages! – you know, it's a how do you make a game of *The Lord Of The Rings*, sort of thing. It's again, you have to distil down what is at the essence of that book.

> **YOU CAN TELL WHEN SOMEONE HAS TAKEN THE TROUBLE TO GET UNDER THE SKIN OF THE BRAND AND DO A GAME THAT FEELS LIKE IT EXTENDS THE BRAND**

And so you helped make the adventure/strategy hybrid *Dune* game, not the Westwood real-time strategy?

Yes, I was very much more involved with the first one, I consulted on the second one but that was the clever people at Westwood that did that one. It'd be unfair for me to say I worked on the second one. With our game, once we decided on the kind of gameplay to have – and that was based on an understanding of what we believed to be the kinds of people that liked that book – I think the biggest challenge after that was balancing the game so that it worked. So the



INTELLIGENT PROPERTY

"We've all played lots and lots licensed games, they have the license on the box or on the loading screen and it feels like when you get to play the game that the license has just been slapped on. And you know, those are pretty hollow experiences. So whenever I've worked on a licensed game, I've made sure I've taken advantage of the brand. If you don't take advantage of the brand it's almost not worth having in the first place."

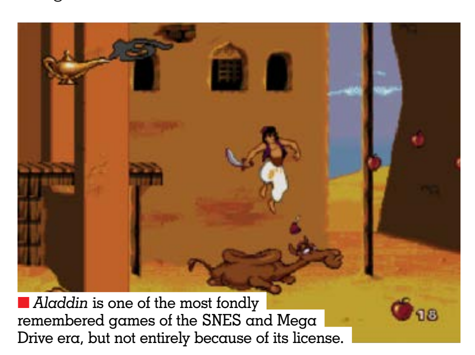
game was up and running in a fairly unattractive form fairly early on, which allowed us to do a lot of play balancing.

How do you approach the development of a licensed game?

When you play a game that's based on a brand – you know, any game – you can tell if the people that made the game were passionate about what they were doing. And that's not just about branded games, any game actually. If you play a game, you can tell whether or not people were passionate about it depending on the amount of TLC they've given the game. If that makes any sense. And that's no different for a branded game; you can tell when someone has taken the trouble to get under the skin of the brand and really do a game that feels like it extends the brand in someway, that could've been done by the people who created the original brand.

One of the most popular licensed games you worked on was *Aladdin* for Disney. What was that like to work on?

When I moved out to the States, Martin Alper – who was the boss of the US office – came in and said 'do you reckon you could put together the team from hell? We've got the chance to do a game based on *Aladdin*, but only if we can have the game done for when the video launches'. Cause it was all about having a game either for theatrical or, for the most part, video release – which was a massive thing back in those days. Which meant we had to put together a team and build the game in five months – and to build a Mega Drive game in five months and get it through all the various Sega testing shenanigans and obviously it had to be manufactured was almost an impossible task. So I said 'sure, why not?'. So we basically started relocating people like David Perry, Nick Bruty, Mark Kelly, Steve Crow, Neil Young, Mike Dietz, Doug TenNapel; so this team was like a team from hell. It's one of those perfect storms where you just got to work with a bunch of amazing people, and David Perry was sort of at the epicentre of this thing, driving the whole thing forwards.



Aladdin is one of the most fondly remembered games of the SNES and Mega Drive era, but not entirely because of its license.

Though there were two *Dune* games in production, Bishop went with more of an adventure game – believing this to be the genre fans of the book would enjoy the most.

How was Disney to work with?

Working on Aladdin - I probably saw the film 40 or 50 times, we all did - but to get access to and get to meet the people that worked on it and meet the directors, for me it was like being a kid in a candy store. And then having to present your game design to Jeffrey Katzenberg - like, *the god*. I can still remember, we had an 8:30 meeting in this big square office, in one of the sub-offices. We knew his reputation as a micromanager, I mean there weren't never any rushes of films when he was the head of the studio that didn't get his stamp of approval before they were put in the can. And I can still remember him going through level one of our game - the Streets of Agrabah - and saying 'I think at this point we need a sight gag. I think that guard, his trousers will drop and he's got polka dot boxer shorts on and he's too embarrassed to attack you because he's covering his modesty'. That was from Jeffrey Katzenberg, the head of Disney studios.

WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE REALLY COOL TO HAVE 20 MILLION DOLLARS OF ADVERTISING AS A RESULT OF OUR GAME BEING PRINTED ON THEIR BOTTLES

Did you find the brand enhanced the game in any particular way?

Well we worked very heavily with the [Disney] animators down in Florida that actually worked on the film. And it was actually the first time that anyone had done that, because up until then everyone just basically did animation frames directly into DPaint. So these frames were animated, scanned and electronically coloured by a company in LA, and again electronically colouring frames was a brand new thing. It was being pioneered by this one company; Ren And Stimpy was the first show that used that process. And so we'd piggybacked off that. Unfortunately when we worked on *Jungle Book*, everyone who had worked on it was in their nineties or dead. So with



Jungle Book it was more access to the brand, though we may well have had access to the archives. *Aladdin* was still a live project, so we had access to the people that had worked on it.

Why do brands often want to get involved with videogames? What's the benefit?
They are popular from the brand holders point of view, and they were popular from the publisher's point of view. A good example of that was *Cool Spot*. So Spot was the logo that 7up used in the States; it was different in Europe, that was *Fido Dido*. In the States there was this character – the red disc in the 7up logo – that would come to life in all their adverts, did something mischievous and would jump back into the logo before any human saw them. And 7up approached Virgin, they thought it would be very cool to associate their brand with games. We thought it would be really cool to have the equivalent of 20 million dollars worth of advertising as a result of our game being printed on their bottles and cans. And you can see how everyone would be a winner in that situation.

THE HOUSE OF MOUSE

"We worked with a whole bunch of people at Disney who a: they got games and b: they were actually involved in making the game. We got given a whole bunch of animators that actually worked on the *Aladdin* movie. There was a very deep integration between us and Disney on *Aladdin*, pretty much unprecedented to be honest. We actually got to meet with Ron Clements and John Musker who were the two directors of *Aladdin*. They had a lot behind it and a lot of personal credibility in the success of it, and so we got unprecedented access to the Disney machine."



7up's American red dot mascot proved that a licensed game can still be a great game, and doesn't even need to leverage the brand in any deep way.

***Cool Spot* was an interesting one for us in the UK because many didn't know it was a licensed game...**
Exactly. In Europe it was an unbranded game, really. It had to stand on its own feet. Apart from the bonus levels [that] were set inside this world with all the bubbles that you had to jump through – it was obvious that you were inside a bottle of 7up, if that you know that it had to do with 7up. The bonus levels were fun anyway – and that was part of our brief – to make it a great game, even if it was an unbranded game because we knew it would be that in Europe. If you do a game and you rely on the brand alone and just slap the brand on then that's not the right way to go. It was important for us anyway to make it a great game, as well as using the brand. So that when the brand wasn't there in Europe it would still do, hopefully well, on its own feet. It did really well in Europe, it's remembered with a lot of fondness by a lot of people which is great. And people to this day still don't know it was a 7up game.

Did you find there was a particular process you had refined during this period that helped make a good licensed game?
I don't think there's any one process. With *Deal Or No Deal* it was 'okay, why is that popular and how can we maintain the picking of boxes, but gamify that?' All we did was we added in a trivia quiz element to the game, where basically you have got to answer a question and if you got the question right then among all the boxes you had to pick from it would eliminate all the high value boxes. So by using some skill, which was the game bit, you would increase the probability of ending up with 250,000 pound box. If you got the question wrong it would block out all the low ones. And that was all we needed to do to turn that into a game. But we had kept what we had decided during our distillation process was the soul of the brand.

This era of gaming had many popular licensed games, but these days there are much fewer released. Why have licensors moved on to other platforms like mobile?
I suppose licensors always want to be on the next big thing. Obviously if you're in the bizdev side you're looking to make as much money from your brands as possible, if new platforms come along why wouldn't you want to have your brands on those new platforms. And actually before your competitors too. But some have been better than others, some have got games and some haven't. And I'm sure that varied relationship with licensors is as varied today as it was back then. I think if you make a good game and you have a great license on that game then that can make a massive difference.

While you were unable to save your game in *Metroid*, it did feature a system where you could recall your progress by entering in a password the game generated for you.

GAME CHANGERS

METROID

Released: 6 August 1986 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo R&D1 **System:** NES, FAMICOM

Celebrating her 30th anniversary of kicking ass on derelict planets, we return to Samus Aran's first adventure: the game that kick-started one of Nintendo's most beloved franchises

BY THE SPRING of 1986, one Japanese developer had already established itself as a titan of two genres. If there was an adventure or platforming game worth playing, you'd better believe it had the Nintendo Seal Of Quality etched on its box art. But after a string of commercial and critical successes with *Donkey Kong*, *Ice Climber*, *Super Mario Bros.*, and *The Legend Of Zelda*, Nintendo set it sights on a new horizon entirely – that of the action genre. *Metroid* was the result.

Forged in the bowels of Nintendo's acclaimed Research & Development 1 division, *Metroid* was unlike anything the publisher had ever attempted. It was a game built around navigating suffocating and complex spaces, with the thrill often derived from investigating its many mysteries, as opposed to the combat or story. It was, in many ways, the perfect marriage of platforming and free-roaming adventure, a core design tenet that has inspired so many games and creatives, even now, 30 years on from its original FAMICOM and NES release.

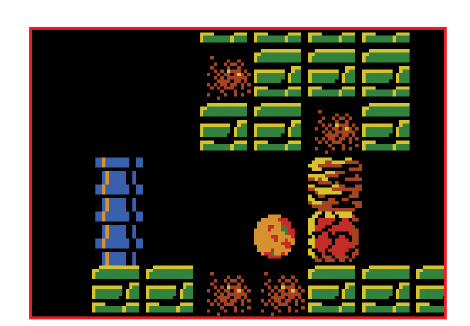
Truth be told, *Metroid* hasn't aged fantastically – indeed it's been superseded in a number of ways, first by SNES sequel *Super Metroid* and then GBA reimagining *Metroid: Zero Mission*. But while much of *Metroid*'s gameplay hasn't stood the test of time, its legacy has.

In many respects that's down to *Metroid*'s oppressive atmosphere and alien art style. The dark tone might have diminished in subsequent sequels, but *Metroid* was a deeply isolating experience. It was challenging too; not necessarily because of its difficulty curve, but because of the sense of perpetual solitude that pervaded the game. For a publisher renowned for providing family-friendly fun, *Metroid* was quite the curve ball.

The influence of Ridley Scott's *Alien* [1979] is obvious in the game's design, as is the aesthetical touch of H.R.

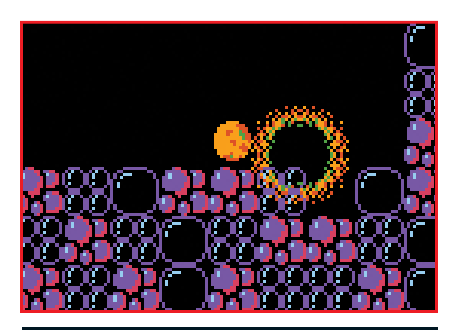
SUITABLY POWERFUL

THE MOST USEFUL POWER SUIT UPGRADES TO UNCOVER IN THE ORIGINAL METROID



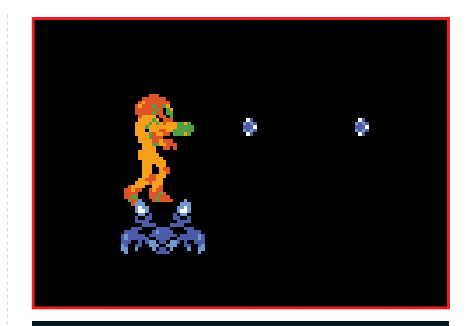
MORPH BALL

★ One of the most prominent and integral items in Samus' arsenal is the Morph Ball. An ability that seems to defy all logic but is super useful nonetheless, the Morph ball is acquired as soon as Samus reaches Brinstar, letting her fit into tight and otherwise inaccessible areas.



MORPH BALL BOMB

★ Once players stumble across the Chozo Statue holding the bomb upgrade, the dynamics of *Metroid* shift. The power-up is used to blast open secret passageways, propel Samus upward, and is needed to open the paths to the Kraid and Ridley boss fights.



ICE BEAM

★ While the Ice Beam can be found in two locations (Brinstar and Norfair) the Bomb upgrade is required to obtain it. Not only does the Ice Beam damage enemies but it can also freeze them in place, creating makeshift platforms for Samus to reach new areas.

Giger, whose work pushed the team to make the caverns of Zebes – and their Space Pirate inhabitants – so mechanically and identifiably strange. Though perhaps *Metroid*'s true genius lies in the way it weaves a sedated soundtrack through its quietest moments. Composer Hirokazu Tanaka leaned on an absence of sound to help emphasise the feeling of isolation, with a hypnotic score and harsh sound effects used sparingly throughout to great atmospheric effect.

Essentially, *Metroid* wanted you to truly believe that you were stranded on a hostile planet. It wanted you to feel fear as you began infiltrating an enemy world all alone. Ill-equipped and under-prepared, you find yourself forced to take up arms against the hordes of strange Space Pirates and the eponymous floating predators. The presence of voiceless bounty hunter Samus Aran – shrouded behind the visor of the iconic power suit – was of little comfort or company. In the bowels of Zebes, you are all alone.

■■■ *Metroid*'s affecting atmosphere meant that players could do nothing but lose themselves in the environments. While the game shared DNA with other side-scrolling platformers, *Metroid* was comparatively complex and sprawling. Unlike *Super Mario Bros.*, which had you progressing from left to right through linear stages, the open-ended world of Zebes was a complex labyrinth, a continuous world that fitted together like a puzzle. The corridors weren't just horizontal spaces for you to bound quickly across, but vertical chasms to navigate blindly. You'd need to lean on all of your platforming skills and any in-game abilities that you had acquired to scale them, with the game pushing you to revisit areas multiple times to find secrets and access previously inaccessible locations.

Figuring out a correct path through this world was a large part of *Metroid*'s appeal – as your sense of frustration grew, so too did your isolation. In 1986, if you got stuck you were stuck until you weren't – there were no game guides to pull up online. The NES's limited processing power meant that many of the rooms looked identical, and there was no in-game map to speak of either. You'd commonly find yourself woefully underpowered, traipsing through areas and enemies you weren't equipped to battle, but that was half the fun of it.

Metroid shared a lot of its core design with *The Legend Of Zelda*. Where Link would find himself throwing bombs against every wall in Hyrule in the vague hope of uncovering a secret cave, Samus too spent much of her time shooting and bombing every pixel-space imaginable. Certain passages were invisible until hit, and many of these areas hid powerful weapon and ability upgrades. *Metroid* would become known for strategically hiding its items throughout the game world, with each discovery giving you access to new areas and secrets.

The *Metroid* series may not be the biggest seller, nor has Nintendo been eager to show it the same love and attention as its *Mario* and *Zelda* franchises, but its impact on the industry is undeniable. It spawned its own sub-genre, it pushed for complexity in side-scrolling action games, and helped carve a place for games that relied on exploration over combat. *Metroid* and the Samus' zero mission changed videogames through a desire to create and innovate, and that's clear to see 30 years later.

METROID WANTED YOU TO TRULY BELIEVE THAT YOU WERE STRANDED ON A HOSTILE PLANET

KEY FACTS

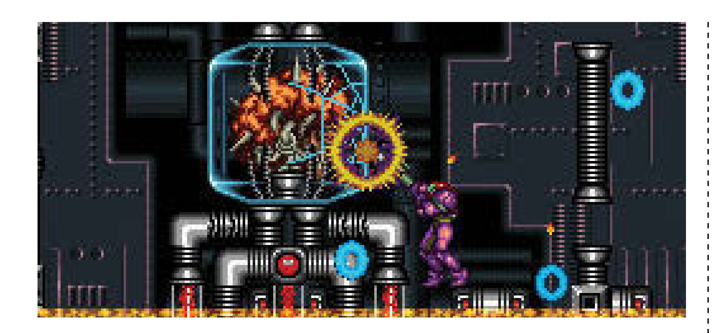
■ The original *Metroid* featured five endings, a rarity for games in the Eighties. These could be obtained by completing the game at various speeds, though the best three would reveal that Samus Aran was actually a female – not a male as the game manual had led players to believe.

■ Many of the weapon and ability power-ups were scattered about in seemingly random locations, leading to something called 'sequence breaking' – it's wholly possible to get certain items too early or too late, pushing *Metroid* to be a favourite for speed-runners.

GAME CHANGERS

METROID SEQUELS RANKED FROM BEST TO WORST

THE HIGHS AND LOWS THAT FOLLOWED SAMUS ARAN'S FIRST ENCOUNTER



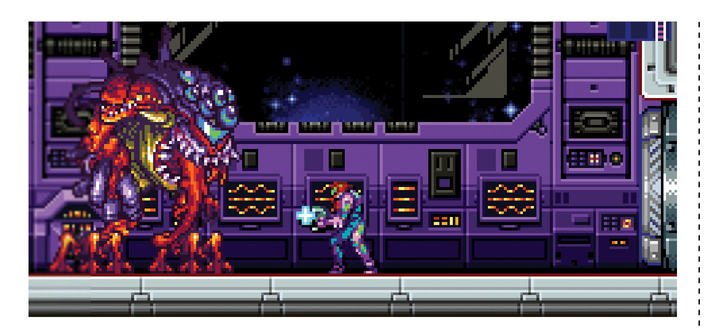
1. SUPER METROID

■ Even when you are moving backwards in *Super Metroid* – cautiously revisiting old areas and investigating new mysteries – you're always moving forwards. This is where Nintendo perfected the mechanics, systems and level design first deployed in *Metroid*, with a game that built on the past while successfully innovating for the future. There's a reason *Super Metroid* is often lauded as one of the greatest games of all time, and that's because it's near-enough perfect.



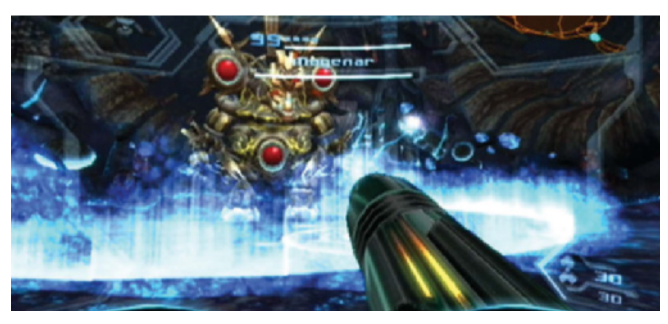
2. METROID PRIME

■ The first *Metroid* game to be released in eight years and arriving just a year after the debut of *Halo: Combat Evolved*, fans were naturally wary of Retro Studios taking Samus into first-person. Thankfully, *Metroid Prime* surpassed all expectations and became a modern classic. Not only did it pioneer environmental storytelling, but it successfully proved that Samus was still relevant today. *Prime* is a vibrant, compelling shooter that everybody should play through at least once.



3. METROID FUSION

For fans of *Super Metroid* – desperate for another faithful side-scrolling entry in the series – *Metroid Fusion* was as near-perfect of a release as could be hoped for. It was a return to the franchise's roots, leaning on a complicated web of corridors and heavy sense of isolation in order to draw the player into the world. It also featured interesting connectivity between the GBA and GameCube, allowing *Metroid Prime* players to get ahold of the Fusion suit.



4. METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION

When Retro Studios made the leap to the Nintendo Wii with *Metroid*, there were natural concerns that the hardware's *unique* control scheme might not be precise enough to service the series. Thankfully all fears were put to rest with *Corruption*, which ended up being the swan song of the *Prime* era. Slightly underappreciated, *Corruption* remains one of the finest games in the series thanks to its focus on first-person environmental storytelling and discovery.



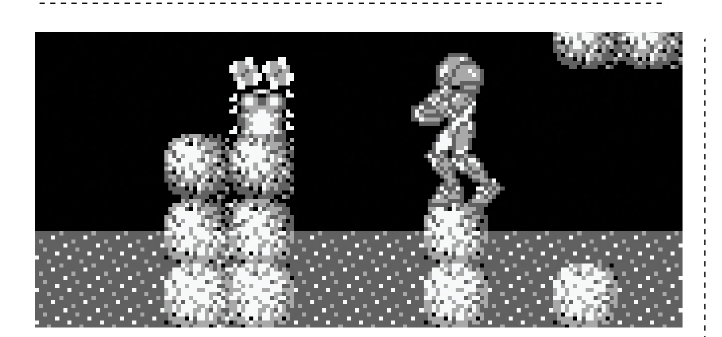
5. METROID: ZERO MISSION

Released in 2004, *Zero Mission* is actually a reimagining of *Metroid* for the GBA. Nintendo was able to preserve the spirit and presence of the original game, while utilising the power of the hardware to iron out some of its more peculiar design decisions. Items and mini-boss locations are given more clarity, a new area is introduced and some of the plot points are cleared up; play this if you're hungry to go back to where it all began.



6. METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES

Metroid Prime 2: Echoes is just that: an echo of what made Retro Studios' *Prime* series so wonderful to begin with. While it offers more of the same fantastic gameplay and world design – the infamous Sky Temple aside, of course – the central premise wasn't as tight, with the struggle against Dark Samus never quite landing as intended. It's a fantastic sequel, but never quite reaches the heights of the games it is sandwiched between.



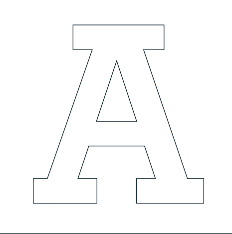
7. METROID II: RETURN OF SAMUS

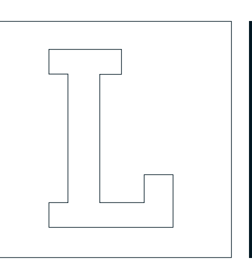
Metroid's first sequel, 1991's *Return Of Samus*, arrived on the original GameBoy and was something of a deviation from the groundwork that the original release established. Many of its shortcomings can be blamed on hardware limitations, though the confusing world map and a handful of odd design choices ensure *Return Of Samus* was little more than fan-service to tide the core-players over until the release of *Super Metroid*.



8. METROID: OTHER M

Metroid: Other M – created by assorted members of Nintendo, Team Ninja and D-Rockets – is widely regarded as the worst of the main *Metroid* canon. Its somewhat linear design, poor power-up management, clumsy control system, and insistence on painting Samus Aran as an ineffectual, fragile heroine mean that this Wii release is widely considered a rare misstep for the franchise across its 30 years of life.




TURTLE BEACH: EAR FORCE STEALTH 350VR

MANUFACTURER: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£59.99**

SOMETHING MANY PEOPLE tend to overlook is that virtual reality isn't just going to revolutionise the way you see and interact with game worlds, but the way that you hear them too. Developers are already coming up with new and quirky ways to play with fully three-dimensional sound spectrums in enclosed spaces, and much of that is wasted on the terrible earphones people use in tandem with their expensive headsets. There's a good reason for this of course, many over-ear headphones don't have a band with the stretch to compensate for the VR headset, that is until Turtle Beach stepped in.

The latest in the company's line of Ear Force gaming headsets, the Stealth 350VR is purpose-built to deliver virtual reality audio with a clear and loud presence. This headset comes equipped with your standardised features – mic monitoring and a detachable noise-cancelling microphone – though it's the drivers that had our full attention. Stealth 350VR comes equipped with battery-powered amplification through 50mm Neodymium speakers, designed to provide clear balance between the soaring highs and bassiest of lows. The headset is, as you might imagine, designed to support PlayStation VR, too – with the design ensuring that there's suitable clearance for the VR headband and necessary cables. Virtual reality is expensive, that we are aware of, but just because you have the next generation of visuals beaming directly into your eyeballs doesn't mean you should skimp on the audio love.
www.intl.turtlebeach.com/gb/stealth-350-vr

VERDICT 8/10

The headband is designed to expand, fitting around virtual reality headsets such as PSVR and Oculus Rift comfortably.

50mm Neodymium drivers provide excellent sound quality, ensuring every action sounds full and weighty.

GAMING CLOTHING



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Winter is coming, and that means it's time to wrap up warm, so why not do so while advertising the smooth, delicious Nuka-Cola taste? You'll be all the talk of the eventual post-apocalypse.
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RAZER DEATHADDER ELITE GAMING MOUSE

SOLD BY: **RAZER** PRICE: **£79.99**

WHETHER YOU'RE AN aspiring competitive PC gamer or an established eSport player, Razer has once again upped the game when it comes to pinpoint mouse control. The DeathAdder Elite Gaming Mouse comes equipped with the world's best optical sensor, a Razer 5G Optical Sensor that tracks up to 16,000 DPI at 450 IPS. If you don't know what any of that means, this pricey piece of equipment may not be designed for you, but know this: it means this mouse is so accurate that any mistakes made in-game are totally your own – no blaming input lag or resolution accuracy any more.

Like most of Razer's products, the DeathAdder Elite also comes equipped with Razer Chroma tech under its shell, giving you an array of customisable, pulsating colours to decorate your new purchase with. As far as we're concerned this is an incremental update over the original (and very good) DeathAdder mouse, though the increased sensitivity is perfect for any players looking to stay on the cutting edge when it comes to competitive FPS gaming and the peripherals required to channel your skills through.
www.razerzone.com/gb-en/store



Razer's DeathAdder has always been killer for FPS games, now even more so with the 5G Optical Sensor.



The Rival 500 comes with Trigger Alerts, designed to communicate mana depletion and cooldowns.

SteelSeries has redesigned the typical 12-button grid layout, built around intuitive thumb and finger placement.

STEELSERIES RIVAL 500

SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **€89.99**

STEELSERIES HAS BEEN steadily moving itself into a position of power in the battle for peripheral supremacy. If you want to dial in pixel-perfect control over your favourite MOBA or MMO, then you really should check out the Rival 500. The manufacturer has abandoned the antiquated 12-button grid layout and – after three years of extensive research and playtesting – and has designed a new system that's built around how your thumb and hand intuitively interact with a mouse.

The result is improved comfort and precision. Accuracy is the key focus of this mouse, made abundantly clear with the introduction of tactile trigger alerts. Placed carefully in the centre of the mouse, the alerts are designed to trigger automatically when certain in-game events occur, such as disables, cooldowns and mana depletion – it's completely up to you to set the parameters.

Combine all of this with a state-of-the-art optical sensor and it's difficult to see any reason to not give the SteelSeries' Rival 500 a chance. It's an innovative new take on competitive-grade mouse peripherals that every serious MOBA player should at least consider.
www.steelseries.com/gaming-mice/rival-500



The artbook takes you on a visual journey from the game's conception to its present-day form.

THE ART OF LEAGUE OF LEGENDS: VOLUME ONE

PUBLISHER: **RIOT GAMES**

IT'S INCREDIBLE REALLY, how far *League Of Legends* has come in the seven years since Riot Games first opened the gates to Summoner's Rift in 2009. The game has undergone a gradual evolution as its Champions, mechanics, meta and even art style have evolved to match the growing influx of players – *League* now services 100 million players a month. *The Art Of League Of Legends: Volume One* chronicles this evolution; it's a thoughtful and honest examination of the mistakes and successes the MOBA has made over the years. It offers a look at early concept artwork of game-altering characters, dives deeply into the design decisions behind Summoner's Rift itself and offers commentary all throughout.

Truth be told, it's incredible to see it unfold in your hands. The game has clear shifts in tone and style, with Riot eager to continue pushing *League Of Legends* to new heights despite its established success in the market. Riot has actually been good enough to put the entire book online, for free, for fans to check out but the physical collection is well worth getting your hands on. This chronicle is presented on a heavy paper-stock and comes bound in a faux-leather hardbound cover. For anybody out there that's spent far too many hours locked in battle down their favourite lane, *The Art Of League Of Legends* is certainly the perfect accompaniment to a lonely coffee table.
euw.merch.riotgames.com



TERRARIA CRAFTING AND CONSTRUCTION HARD BOOK

This second official hardback into the deep and wonderful world of *Terraria* is designed to reveal new and timesaving techniques for mining different terrains. It's the ultimate guide to expert control over 150 block types and the hundreds of tools that exist within the game.
www.forbiddenplanet.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED: LAST DESCENDANTS

Matthew J. Kirby takes *Assassin's Creed* fans on yet another adventure through time, this time landing in 1863 as the Draft Riots are ravaging New York City. There might not be a new *AC* game this year, but that doesn't mean there aren't opportunities to strap in for an Animus-enabled adventure.
www.forbiddenplanet.com



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE OFFICIAL COOKBOOK

The Alliance and Horde are locked in near-constant battle and that works up quite the appetite. Thankfully, this handy official cookbook will teach you how to whip up a few meals fit for a war chief; it's a fun and pretty silly compendium of recipes themed up for the hit MMO.
www.forbiddenplanet.com



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